

## Teenage Dream by lovelysarcastic

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**Summary:**

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In the living-room, there was a boy who was not Eleven’s best friend’s older brother. This was one looked tall, lanky, with dark hair and pale skin. He was watching TV with the saddest eyes she had ever seen.

“That’s my cousin,” Max answered. “Mike.”

# 1. Chapter 1

*“Who is he?” Eleven asked her best friend as they stopped in her house’s hall to take off their shoes.*

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*“That’s my cousin,” Max answered. “Mike.”*

On November 6th 2016, Ted and Karen Wheeler died in a car crash, leaving behind three orphans: Nancy, who was twenty and in college taking a Journalism course, Mike, who was seventeen and in his junior year in high school, and Holly, who was ten and had a great love for drawing.

After Ted and Karen’s sudden death, all their relatives came together to find a solution for the three orphans. Nancy, who had the right to be present in that reunion, said she would get a job to pay off her flat’s rent and to stay in college. She told her uncles and aunts she did not want to be burden as she was twenty and already with many goals set in her mind. However, little Holly was still a child. The Wheeler’s relatives decided among themselves that she would be staying with her grandparents, her father’s parents, in Ohio until Nancy Wheeler finished college and got a real job.

Then, there was the boy. They all agreed that Mike Wheeler, at the age of seventeen, could be more of an independent boy, yet it was required for him to stay close to his older sister, Nancy, since he wasn’t dealing very well with his parents’ death, as neither of the kids were. Karen Wheeler’s younger sister, Mandy, who was married to a guy called John Winter, and had two kids, a boy and a girl, said she would take care of Mike since they lived in Hawkins, a small town in Indiana. Nancy was attending University of Indiana and was only one hour away from them.

So, the three Wheeler siblings found themselves separated, only with promises to talk on the phone every day and meet during holidays.

On November 18th, Mike moved in with his aunt Mandy and her husband. Their kids, Billy and Max, welcomed him as best as they could. Billy was a twenty-one-year-old guy who was supposed to be at college, but had flunked during sophomore year and had yet returned to his studies. He wasn't working either.

Max was a fifteen-year-old redhead that loved skating and had a best friend who, weirdly enough, liked to be called Eleven.

"This is Eleven, Mike," Max introduced her best friend to her cousin, who had been watching TV quietly until they arrived home from school, "She is great and you'll be seeing her around a lot, okay?"

Mike looked at the fifteen-year-old girl that his cousin had brought home. She was a petit girl, with short, curly brown hair and big brown eyes. She was wearing a pink dress with white knee-socks and was giving him a weird kind of look that he did not quite understand.

"It's okay, right?" Max insisted.

Mike shrugged.

That was good enough for Max, who pulled Eleven to the kitchen, where they would be eating a quick snack and then study for their English test.

"He doesn't talk much, does he?" Eleven asked her best friend.

"His parents died ten-or-so days ago," Max told her. Eleven went wide-eyed. "He is a bit traumatized, my mom says. He only talks to his siblings on the phone, and sometimes with my mom. He's cool, really. I remember how he was before... He smiled a lot. Now, he's just... sad. It's sad."

While Max prepared them a couple of sandwiches, Eleven peeked at the boy in the living-room. Mike was still watching TV with that gloomy gaze. She wondered if he was paying attention to what was happening on the TV, or simply dreaming away about other times.

Eleven couldn't imagine living without her mom, Terry Ives. She had never met her father, so to live without him was okay; it was normal. She had her mom and that was enough. But it would destroy her if

one day her mother would just disappear from her life. It should be terrible. Mike should be suffering a lot.

Unexpectedly, Mike turned his head and their eyes met. Eleven's heart skipped a beat. She was suddenly scared of his reaction upon seeing her staring at him. She should look away and pretend it had been an accident that she had been looking his way. Yet, she didn't turn her gaze away.

Why couldn't she turn her gaze away?

*He smiled a lot, Max had said.*

Eleven was suddenly sure that Mike Wheeler had a really pretty smile.

"Here you go, Ellie."

Max placed a plate with a sandwich in front of her best friend. Eleven's eyes left Mike's and she looked at Max with a guilty expression. After noticing her best friend had not seen her staring at Mike, Eleven smiled and grabbed the sandwich.

"Thanks. Your cheese sandwiches are the best, Max."

Max rolled her eyes.

"I know, Ellie, I know."

*"Why do you call yourself Eleven?" Mike asked her.*

*Eleven stared at him, dumbfounded, completely forgetting that she had to go to the bathroom to clean her teeth and pee. She had been waiting for the bathroom to be emptied for around ten minutes now, daydreaming about Mike Wheeler and how his eyes were so sad all the time. She had not expected for Mike himself to come out of it, and then talk to her. Since she had first seen him at her best friend's house a month ago, Mike had never talked to her. Until this question.*

*"It's my birthday," she mumbled the answer back. "Eleventh month, eleventh day."*

*Mike frowned, thoughtful. Then, he nodded and left, turning to his bedroom, which was two doors away from the bathroom and right in front of Max's, where Eleven had spent the previous night.*

*After his bedroom's door closed, Eleven raised a hand to her chest. Her heart was beating like a crazy dog chasing a bone.*

"Hey, is Mike around?"

Eleven raised her head from her homework after hearing a guy's voice echoing through the hall and into the kitchen.

"Yeah, downstairs in the basement," Max replied. "You guys can come in."

"Thanks," another voice – this one was quieter and sweeter than the other one - said.

Eleven saw two guys passing through the hall and going into the direction of the basement. One of them was tall and dark-skinned, the other was quite small for his age and had brown, straight hair. He noticed Eleven and smiled at her before disappearing after the other guy.

"Mike has friends," Max said upon entering the kitchen. She seemed surprised. "I did not know that."

"He has been here for more than three months now," Eleven replied.

Mike had been living with the Winters for three months and six days, actually. But Eleven *was not* counting. And she *had not* noticed how he hadn't been around for Christmas holidays too.

"He has, hasn't he?" Max suddenly realized as she sat down next to Eleven again and grabbed her Biology book. "Anyways, one of his friends was cute. The short one. Did you see him?"

Eleven nodded.

"Did you think he was cute?"

Eleven shrugged.

Max groaned. “Why don’t you ever think boys are cute?”

Eleven looked down at her half-answered exercise and tried not to blush. She thought Mike was cute. But Max couldn’t know that.

“I think boys are cute,” Eleven replied the most innocent response she got.

“But never the same ones as I do,” Max complained. Then, she kicked Eleven’s foot under the table. “One of us has a terrible taste in men and I’m sure it’s you.”

Eleven rolled her eyes and went back to completing her half-answered exercise.

Beauty had no dogmatic structure, Eleven knew that since little. Her mother made sure she knew that. But Max was going through a phase in which she thought only one type of guys was cute (and most of them, for some reason, looked like the guys from One Direction), and Eleven just... just looked at people in a different light. Like... Mike’s sad eyes and smile-less lips. They had infatuated her in a way that she did not understand.

She wondered, during many nights before going to sleep, how his face would look like if he smiled. He was pretty already, but imagine with a smile...

“Do you know the answer to exercise 5?” Max asked.

Eleven stared at her notebook. The two pages in front of her were almost all written up with answers to exercises. But she had not reached number 5. So, she shook her head and went back to think about Mike’s face.

She wished she could tell Max about... about what? This stupid crush? Was it a crush? All she knew is that she thought about Mike Wheeler’s face too much and her heart beat like crazy whenever he showed up. That one time he had talked to her got her to dream about him a week straight.

But, no, she couldn’t tell Max. Max would freak out because it was her cousin. Her going-through-a-long-emo-phase cousin who barely

talked to them despite being living with them for months now.

Maybe it was the bad boy vibe he gave off.

Eleven wringed her nose. Bad boy? Mike Wheeler did not give off bad boy vibes. He was just... so quiet and so... unexpected.

“Hey there.”

Eleven and Max raised their heads at the same time. The dark-skinned, tall boy had just entered the kitchen, followed by the short, cute guy and Mike. Eleven’s eyes stopped on Mike, who looked at her for a few seconds before walking to the fridge and opening it.

“I’m Will,” the short guy introduced himself.

The other one, who had gone with Mike and was now casually leaning back on the kitchen’s counter, snorted.

“You’re introducing yourself now, Will?”

“Yeah, and you should too. It’s the polite thing to do,” Will replied. The guy rolled his eyes. “That’s Lucas.”

Max gave them both a weird look before smiling.

“Hey. I’m Max. This is Eleven.” She pointed at Eleven, who had turned her head and was discreetly checking on what Mike and Lucas were doing. They had taken out the cheese and ham from the fridge and were now standing by the small isle where Mrs. Winter did most preparation for meals. They also had the bag of bread with them.

“Eleven? Why Eleven?” Lucas asked, giving her a weird look.

Before Eleven could answer, Mike, who was preparing the sandwich for them to eat, spoke, “It’s because of her birthday.”

Max’s mouth went wide-opened as her eyes turned to a blushing Eleven.

“Really?” Lucas said, surprised.

Mike nodded and passed him a ham-and-cheese sandwich.

“Yeah, eleventh month, eleventh day.” Mike looked over at Eleven. “Right?”

Eleven opened her mouth to talk, but no words came out. So, she gulped and nodded.

Her heart was louder enough everyone could hear. Her throat was dry and her cheeks were starting to go even pinker because of Max’s long, shocked stare. She turned around in the chair and grabbed her pencil firmly before starting her study again. Or, at least, trying to start.

After a while, Mike and his friends left the kitchen. They had their sandwiches and drinks, so they went back to the basement to hang out.

“Okay, how does he know that?” Max asked.

Eleven licked her lips, her throat still dry, her heart still beating at an unusual pace.

“He asked me once.”

Max blinked, staggered.

“He asked you?! W-what? He talked to you?”

Eleven nodded and tried to re-read exercise number 5’s headline. But all she could think about was Mike’s eyes as he stared at her, waiting for her confirmation about her nickname. He always had that sad look on him, even when doing normal things like making sandwiches for his friends... Eleven didn’t want him to have that sad look.

“Do you have a crush on my cousin, Ellie?!”

Eleven dropped her pencil and looked over at her best friend. She started shaking her head frenetically.

“N-no! He asked me once about it and I answered. That was it, Max! Jesus!”



Max looked over at her best friend with suspicious eyes. Eleven lowered her head to the Biology textbook, pretending to ignore her fast-beating heart and the tension in her shoulders. Max couldn't know about her... whatever-it-was-on-Mike-thing.

"Okay, then," Max finally said, facing her books again. "It just surprised me that he talked to you. He barely talks to me."

"I'm here a lot," Eleven muttered, placing a hand on her head to hold it as she re-read the exercise again to try understanding it.

"Maybe he got used to you, yeah," Max agreed.

Eleven clenched her hand, grabbing a few strands of her own hair. She didn't know how to react to any kind of information or guess about Mike's behaviour towards her.

*"It's Valentine's Day and you're in a library."*

*Eleven raised her head, surprised, and found Mike Wheeler staring at her with his sad, almost apathetic eyes.*

*She blushed and looked down at the book she had been reading – Harry Potter and the Half-blooded Prince. It was her favourite out of all the series.*

*"Max has a Valentine date and I really..." Eleven shut herself up.*

*Mike frowned his eyebrows, trying to understand what the end of her sentence was. When he understood, he took the seat in front of her.*

*Eleven looked at him, surprised.*

*"Lucas and Will have Valentine dates too," he told her. Then, he opened his book and started reading as well.*

*Eleven's heart beat fast all afternoon.*

"I don't think it will work out between you two," Jennifer Hayes told Eleven as she braided her hair. "I mean, he seems like... like he has no feelings."

Eleven sighed sadly.

Jennifer Hayes and Eleven had been neighbours since they were five after her family moved to Hawkins because of Mr. Hayes' promotion at work. Jennifer was a petit, blonde girl with soft skin and a kind smile. The two girls barely talked in school and, since Eleven was always with Max, the two of them only got together occasionally, when neither had something to do at home. But they trusted each other and talked to each other about things they didn't want to share with anyone else.

Having no guts to talk to Max about her cousin, Eleven turned to Jennifer Hayes in a warm afternoon in the beginnings of March. Max had gone on a day-out with her family, including Mike, and Eleven was stuck at home while her mother worked until five pm. Jennifer had been home too, so they decided to spend the afternoon watching movies. At a point, Jennifer decided that Eleven would look cute with a braid and started playing with her hair.

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings," Jennifer added after Eleven's muteness became too long. "I mean--"

"I know, don't worry. He is just... an illusion. A daydream, I guess."

"Because he's all mysterious," Jennifer said with a giggle.

"Well, no... And yes. I don't know. He's just... cute."

Jennifer finished Eleven's braid and moved to sit in front of the girl. She put a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"There are plenty of cute boys in the world, El. Don't get stuck on one."

But how could she not be stuck on him? All the long stares they shared, that afternoon they spent in the library on Valentine's Day, the times he would open the door for her at Max's house, or would give her a sandwich because he had already been preparing some and she and Max would show up hungry... He was kind. He just didn't smile, or talk much because he was stuck on the past... On the day his parents died.

Maybe he thought he didn't deserve to be happy in life now that they were gone. Maybe he had left friends behind where he had lived before and was in grief for that loss too. Maybe he hated being in Hawkins. Maybe... this was how he was now.

*But he could smile*, Eleven thought. A smile-

"El?" Jennifer called.

Eleven blinked, confused. She saw how Jennifer was looking at her worried and forced a smile.

"I'm not going to be stuck on a guy when there are plenty out there."

Jennifer smiled at her.

"Exactly." Then, she turned around to grab the remote control from the coffee table and started changing channels. She stopped at E!. "Oooh, the Kardashians."

The rest of the afternoon was spent watching episodes of *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, only taking a break when Terry Ives got home from work with a box of cakes. She worked at the most popular coffee shop in Hawkins, being one of the managers of the place for five years now.

That night, during dinner, Terry asked her daughter how her day went by. Eleven kept it simple, saying she spent it with Jennifer since Max was gone for the day with her family.

"Oh, really? We should take a day-off too, sweetie. What do you think?" Terry asked.

Eleven nodded with a smile.

"Sounds great, mama."

"Anyways, how's Max's boyfriend?"

Eleven snorted.

Max's new – and first – boyfriend was a boy from their class called

Troy Harrington. He was the typically cute boy who all girls knew he was cute, but none would actually date him. But Max, being Max, decided she wanted to date him and got him to take her out on Valentine's Day. Now, they had been dating for almost a month. Things were going well. Eleven didn't think Troy was the boy for Max, though.

"He's good, I guess," Eleven said.

She still saw plenty of Max, yet not as much as before. Max, who used to have all days of the week free for Eleven, now had three or four, depending on the week. Troy wanted to spend a lot of his time with his girlfriend, more than Max wanted to spend with her boyfriend. Eleven just let them be as long as Max was happy.

"What about your boyfriend?" Terry Ives asked with a sneaky smile.

Eleven rolled her eyes.

"Mama, I've told you this a million times: if I get a boyfriend, you'd be the second one to know."

"The second?" Terry frowned, almost looking offended.

"Max would be the first, of course."

Terry Ives laughed.

"Of course."

*"What kind of things does Max like?" Mike asked her randomly.*

*Eleven had been going from the bathroom back to Max's bedroom when Mike's bedroom door opened and he showed up.*

*"Hum..."*

*"It's her birthday next week, isn't it?"*

*Eleven nodded.*

*"What kind of things would she like as a gift?"*

*Eleven thought for a bit, ignoring how nervous she suddenly was. Her fingers were trembling against her yellow dress.*

*“Skates. Food. Books about feminism.”*

*Mike raised an eyebrow and his face turned into a grimace expression. Eleven was sure that was his way of expression some kind of smile or snort.*

*“Okay. Thanks, Eleven.” He went back into his bedroom.*

*Eleven stood there for a bit still. He had called her by her nickname. Her heart couldn’t handle it.*

“So, they are still dating,” Jennifer noticed as she looked over at Max and Troy who were playing volleyball with Mike’s friends, Will and Lucas. They had showed up to take Mike for a ride, but Max said it was her birthday party and her cousin could not leave, but they were invited to stay. So, they did.

“Yup,” Eleven replied, looking at where Mike was sitting, next to Dustin Henderson, a boy from their class who had been invited because he was funny and Max considered him more a friend than a classmate. A few other people from their class had been invited as well. Jennifer had been on the guests’ list because Max knew she and Eleven got along pretty well outside school, and a friend of El was a friend of Max. “Two months now.”

“Jesus.” Jennifer made a face. “I could not stand Troy Harrington for two months. I mean, he is cute, but... I don’t know. I just couldn’t.”

Eleven put a hand in front of her mouth to hide a giggle. She could not be mean about her best friend’s boyfriend. He made Max happy.

“Anyways, that’s Mike, right?” Jennifer asked out of blue, pointing her finger discreetly at Mike, who was really interested in the conversation he was having with Dustin. It was quite fascinating to see him interact with someone else, to see his lips move when he replied to them, to see him nod his head whenever he agreed...

“Yup.”

Jennifer stared at him for a while. Eleven hit her arm.

“Don’t stare at him.”

“Why? He isn’t look- Oh, he’s looking now.”

Shyly, Eleven glanced at where Mike was and saw that Dusting was now standing by the snacks table, while Mike was looking their way with a deep frown on his face. Eleven turned her face away from him.

“God, you’re blushing,” Jennifer commented, surprised. “Really blushing. Like-“

“Hey, Jennifer,” Max called. “Do you want to play with Will? Lucas is mad because he keeps losing.” And she laughed along with Troy.

“No, I’m not,” Lucas replied offended. “I’m just... tired.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Right, Lucas, right.”

Jennifer looked at Eleven.

Eleven frowned.

“You don’t have to ask me for permission.”

Jennifer leaned over to give her a kiss on the cheek and stood up, running to where the other three were playing. She was part of the volleyball team in Hawkins High School since the age of fourteen and had been chosen as the sub-captain this year. When Will found out about this information, he let out a happy scream.

“We are so gonna win now!”

“Good for you!” Lucas shouted from the snack table, pretending to be annoyed.

Eleven tried to pay attention to the volleyball game now that Jennifer was playing as well and she had no one to talk to. The other kids from their class that Max had invited were all doing their things, Dustin was now talking to Lucas by the snack table and Mike-

Eleven frowned. Mike was nowhere to be seen.

She turned to look at the kitchen's glass door and only managed to see Billy inside drinking a beer and talking to his father. She looked back at her friends playing volleyball, yet not actually paying attention this time.

Where did Mike go? He wouldn't just leave his friends here and go hide in his bedroom. He wasn't that type of person, that Eleven knew. There were many times she had seen Lucas and Will making small chat with Billy, or Mrs. Winter or even Mr. Winter, as polite people they were, and Mike would just stand there next to them, awkward and dying to get out of there, but he wouldn't.

So, where did he-

"Hey."

Eleven raised her head and saw Mike staring down at her. She blinked, confused. And even more confused she was when he sat down next to her.

"I gave a book about feminism to Max," he told her, bending his legs and placing his arms over his knees.

"R-really?" Eleven managed to say. Her heart was picking its pace up. *Stop it, heart.*

"Last night," Mike replied, looking over at his cousin. "She loved it. She even invited me to her birthday party, and let my friends stay too."

Eleven looked at the volleyball game. Will and Jennifer were doing a happy dance while Troy and Max shook their heads in defeat.

"That's cool," Eleven replied, not sure if it was the right thing to say. "I told you she would like," she added.

Mike glanced at her.

"What about you?"

Eleven blinked.

“What about me?”

“What did you give Max as a birthday gift?”

“Oh.” Eleven let out. “My presence, of course.”

Mike turned his head to her.

“Your presence?”

“Yeah. It’s worth like... a billion diamonds, so... yeah,” she explained with a serious expression.

Mike stared at her, his eyes a bit wide-opened. He was confused, Eleven noticed. Then, he pressed his lips together and they started to move up and down, almost as if he was controlling something.

Eleven was trying to understand what he was doing when Mike lowered his head and let out a small laugh.

She blinked.

Mike... had just laughed. At a bad joke she had told.

He laughed.

Mike was now shaking his head, trying to control his chuckle, and looked up at her.

“I was not expecting you to say that,” he confessed with traces of laughter in his facial expression.

“Thanks?” Eleven said, unsure.

And then, out of blue, making Eleven’s heart beat faster than it ever had, Mike Wheeler smiled at her for the first time ever. And it was just beautiful.

*I knew he was prettier with a smile on his face.*

“You’re welcome, Eleven.”



Eleven smiled back.

*“Do you guys need any help?” Mike asked them.*

*Eleven looked at him from behind Max’s, and noticed how his eyes were locked on her even though it was Max that replied, “Can you help us in English?”*

*Mike shrugged.*

*“I can try,” he said.*

*Max looked at Eleven, asking for her opinion. She shrugged, pretending to be cool with it, despite her heart beating like crazy and her right hand had trembled when Mike had entered the kitchen.*

*“Come on, help us, then,” Max said and moved her stuff a chair away from Eleven.*

*When Mike sat down between them, Eleven was able to smell his perfume. It wasn’t a strong smell, nor was it sweet, like her or Max’s perfume, but it was good. Sour, but good.*

*His smell haunted her from then on.*

*“I broke up with Troy,” Max said on the last day of school.*

*They had finished lunch a while ago and Max had disappeared afterwards, saying she had something to do. Eleven had thought she had gone to the bathroom or something, but no. She had gone to talk to Troy.*

*“Why?” Eleven asked, moving away from a couple of girls who were walking down the corridor and taking up too much space.*

*“It’s summer, and... I want to enjoy it. Besides, Troy is going to a summer camp. I know what he was going to do there with all those girls.”*

*Eleven looked at her friend, confused.*

*“How can you think like that?”*

Max shrugged. They stopped by her locker and she opened it.

“I know Troy. I did date him for the last couple of months.”

Eleven made a face and said nothing. As long as Max was happy...

“Hey guys!” Dustin stopped by. “You guys ready for our last class?”

Max closed her locker and zipped her schoolbag.

“More than ready, Dustin. More than ready!” She said back with a huge smile. “I cannot wait to spend my days camping and in the pool, right, El?”

Eleven wrinkled her nose at the idea of spending her afternoon in the public pool. That place was disgusting. Kids peed in the pool and old men went there to goggle at teenagers.

“Oh, we can get together once in a while, right?” Dustin asked as they started to move.

“Of course,” Max replied. “I mean, we have to go kick ass in paintball. I haven’t forgotten that you promised me that.”

Dustin chuckled tensely.

“I thought you didn’t remember that...”

“Nonsense! I want to paintball the shit out of you, Henderson.”

Eleven saw how Dustin’s faces went dark red and he stuttered out an answer for Max.

“S-s-sure thing, M-Max.”

Max smiled at him, naïve at how nervous she had made the boy.

After they were done with Biology class and the school bell rang, a wave of excited teenagers filled the hallways for, the most, ten minutes before Hawkins High School was finally empty. For three months, it would basically remain like that.

Eleven waited with Max for Billy to come and pick them up. Eleven’s

mom could never pick her up since school finished at four and she left work at five. So, for years now, Eleven would most likely go to Max's house until her mother picked her up, or she would get the bus to go home.

"He's not going to come," Max complained, pissed.

Billy had one job when it came to his little sister: pick her up when her parents couldn't. But he almost never came. He always forgot. Their parents would grumble at him for a few minutes and then let it go.

"Or he is," Eleven replied, with a small smile, seeing the black car that belonged to Billy turning at the end of the street and rolling until it stopped right in front of them.

Max and she peeked inside and saw Mike at the wheel. Max frowned.

"Where's Billy?"

"Sleeping," Mike replied. "He asked me to pick you guys up."

Max rolled her eyes.

"That asshole," she muttered and went around the car to go the front passenger's seat.

Eleven and Mike stared at each other for a few seconds.

"Aren't you going to get in?" He finally asked her.

She nodded and clumsily got into the car, taking the seat behind Mike.

Mike was careful driver, unlike Max's older brother who did not care about red lights most of the times. Max would always shout at him during the drive from school to home, and Eleven would pretend she wasn't there hearing the two siblings fighting. However, with Mike, the car was silent. Max did not have any reasons to shout at him, nor did she know how to make small chat with him since Mike preferred quietness.

Eleven spent the entire ride playing with the soft cloth of her light blue dress and trying not to look at Mike's head in front of her.

"Hey, did you go to school today?" Max asked her cousin.

Mike shook his head.

"It was the last day. What could they teach me on the last day?" Mike questioned.

"Ugh, that was what I told my mom, but she made me come nonetheless!"

Mike did not reply.

They were quiet for a while, Eleven looking out of the window, seeing the streets go by. At one of them, she saw a couple of kids wrestling on a house's front yard. Then, she saw two women, neighbours, talking to each other by their mail boxes.

It was summer. You could feel summer everywhere. Eleven smiled softly.

Summer was not her favourite season, but she did like to spend three months without school. Moreover, she and her mother spent more time together since she sometimes would go to the coffee shop and help around.

"So, what are you guys going to do this Summer?" Mike asked.

Max looked at her cousin, momentarily surprised that he had initiated a conversation. After the surprise vanished from her eyes, she shrugged.

"We're going to *carpe diem* the vacation, isn't that right, Ellie?"

Eleven nodded shyly.

Actually, Max had a ton of ideas planned out for them. She was just waiting for the right moments to convince Eleven to do them with her. Eleven was a bit, well, scared, but not scared, to socialize with other people. Max wanted to go out a lot this summer since she knew

her parents would be celebrating their twentieth-fifth anniversary with a three-week vacation somewhere in Europe and Billy had got a summer job working at a factory on the night shift.

“And you?” Max asked Mike.

Mike shrugged, turning right in the street their house was.

“Lucas and Will want to spend a lot of days at the lake,” he said.

“The lake? That sounds fun!” Max turned her head to Eleven.  
“Doesn’t it?”

Eleven shrugged.

“I suppose.”

“Can we go with you guys some time?” Max asked her cousin as he parked Billy’s car in front of their house.

Mike turned to his cousin and frowned.

“Sure. I guess.”

“Cool,” Max replied with a proud smile and got out of the car.

Eleven did too, almost at the same time as Mike. There was a moment in which they stared at each other again. Then, Eleven closed the car’s door and followed Max to the house.

She did not want Mike to see her in a bikini. She could not go to the lake with them. What was Max thinking?!

*Max doesn’t know about your stupid crush.*

Maybe it was time to tell her.... Maybe, if Eleven told her, the crush would go away. She just needed to confess it out loud to someone that knew Mike as well, not Jennifer Hayes. Maybe then, she would see Mike through Max’s eyes and move on from him.

Eleven stopped in the middle of the Winter’s hall. Max was moving around in the kitchen, certainly preparing them a snack. Eleven

gulped. She was going to tell Max about-

“Why are you standing there?”

Eleven turned on her heels and saw Mike entering the house, closing the door behind him.

“N-no reason,” she said.

Mike frowned.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

Eleven nodded.

“Yup, just, you know, overwhelmed... Vacation.”

To her surprise, he half-smiled at her answer.

“You’re a funny girl, Eleven,” Mike said and went around her to walk across the corridor and go down the basement.

Eleven closed her eyes for a second.

Why did he have to smile and compliment her?

“El, are you coming or what? I’ve got Cheetos!” Max shouted from the kitchen.

Eleven snorted and shook her head at her friend’s words before leaving her school bag by the coat hanger, just like Max had done, and entering the kitchen.

*“I think this is the summer, El, the summer where you get to kiss a boy,” Max said to her one afternoon in her backyard, while they were sunbathing.*

*Eleven, who had an arm over her forehead to shadow off the sun, rolled her eyes.*

*“I’ve kissed a boy.”*

*“Yeah, James Moore in sixth grade does not count anymore, I’m sorry. It*

*has been too long.”*

*Eleven did not reply at those words. The boy she wanted to kiss wouldn't kiss her.*

Eleven took another deep breath, feeling trapped between Mike and Max's bodies. They were in the backseat of Lucas' truck, on their way to the lake. It was the second week of July and Max's parents had left yesterday to their vacation on Europe. Billy was left home sleeping. He had come home from his shift almost at ten pm and had gone straight to bed.

“I hope Cindy is there,” Lucas said out of blue.

Will and Mike snorted at him.

“Who's Cindy?” Max asked, curious.

Eleven lowered her eyes to her hands, which were intertwined together over her lap. Her arm was touching Mike's for too long now. She could feel how warm his skin was against hers, and it made her heart beat fast.

Her heart always beat fast when Mike was around.

“This girl Lucas has a crush on,” Will said.

“She's the love of my life!” Lucas exclaimed.

Will laughed loud at those words.

“She's just hot,” Mike commented.

“JUST? JUST? Mike, you- I don't even know what to say to you!” Lucas sounded offended. Will kept laughing.

Max looked over at her cousin.

“Isn't that what you guys want? A hot girl?” She mocked.

“That's what *Lucas* wants,” Mike replied.

Max snorted and shook her head, turning it to the window. They

were basically in the middle of the woods. They should be near the lake now.

Eleven got the guts to raise her head and look at Mike. He lowered his eyes to look back at her. Eleven found herself biting her bottom lip. Mike noticed that and blinked.

"I don't get what your problem with Cindy is," Lucas suddenly said. "She's really cool."

"Our problem is how you act when you're around her, man," Will said. "Right, Mike?"

Mike turned his gaze away from Eleven and nodded, agreeing with Will.

"I don't- Ugh, never mind." Lucas stopped the car. "We're here."

The lake wasn't much crowded, so they got a nice spot by a tree, which was the perfect distance between the truck and the lake.

Eleven and Max laid down their towels next to each other and the boys put theirs behind them, Mike taking up the place under the tree.

Max wasn't shy when it came to her body, so she took off her shorts and t-shirt with no problem, and then pointed at Lucas and Will. "Race you to the water."

"Dude, I still have my shoes on!" Lucas complained.

Will, who had already taken off his clothes too, ran after Max to the water.

Lucas cursed and took off his shoes as fast as he could before he went after them. When he jumped into the water, there was a big splash. Max and Will laughed after spitting out the water they had swallowed because of his jump.

Eleven glanced at Mike behind her, who had no shirt on and was now sitting on his towel with a book on his hands. She frowned.

"You don't want to go to the water?" She asked.



Mike raised his head.

“Not now. I’m good here,” he replied. He licked his lips and his eyes drifted from her face to her covered body. “Are you going to sunbath in all those clothes?”

Eleven shook her head and turned around, facing the lake. She had chosen a white dress this morning, one of the cutest she had since she knew she would be coming to the lake with Mike and his friends. She also had one of her best bikinis on, but she was afraid to show it off. Max loved it, of course. It was a light pink bikini with a small ribbon on the bra.

Finding some courage, and pretending Mike was not behind her, Eleven pulled one of the dress’ strips out of her shoulder, and then the other one. The dress fell on the floor swiftly and she stepped out of it.

Eleven turned around and bent over to pick the dress up. When she raised herself up, her eyes met Mike’s gaze. He looked down at his book quickly.

“EL, COME TO THE WATER!” Max shouted from the lake, waving her arms.

Eleven nodded and held one finger up, as in to tell Max she would be there in a minute. She first put away her dress inside her bag and then, taking one last glance at Mike, she walked to the water.

She didn’t like jumping into it like Max and the other two boys. She preferred to face the chilly water slowly, first sticking her feet and half of her legs into it, while sitting in the border. Then, she would jump inside and try to take a dive.

“MIKE, WHAT ABOUT YOU?” Lucas shouted.

Mike waved at them, saying no.

“PUSSY!” Lucas shouted.

Mike rolled his eyes at his friend.

“Is that Cindy girl around?” Max asked Lucas.

Lucas looked around for a while before shaking his head.

“Nah.”

“Maybe next time,” Will joked, swimming on his back.

“Don’t say things you don’t mean, Will Byers,” Lucas said grumpy.

Both Max and Eleven giggled at him. He took one look at them before diving into the water.

Max was suddenly pulled inside the water and Eleven laughed at the distressful face her friend had made.

“Lucas, honestly!” Max complained after coming back from underwater.

Lucas shook his head, small drops of water firing away from it.

“You want to go again?” He asked with a sneaky smile.

“Uh, NO?!”

But Lucas threw himself at her and they went under again.

Discreetly, Eleven looked over her shoulder at where Mike was sitting. He was focused on his book, with a deep frown between his eyebrows and biting his bottom lip.

“You like him, eh?”

Eleven jumped surprised. Will had swum to the border and had his arms over the wet grass, next to Eleven. He was looking at her with a serious expression.

“N-no,” Eleven muttered, trying to control herself from taking another look at Mike. She started to play with her feet in the water.

“It’s okay if you do,” Will replied.

She looked at him, confused.

“Why?” She asked.

Will just smiled, gave himself a push on the lake’s edge and swam away on his back.

Max and Lucas were already in the middle of the lake, friending other people.

Eleven played around with the water for a bit, but she was not in the mood to jump in and join her friends in socializing with strangers. Eventually, she stood up and walked back to her towel.

Mike raised his head, hearing someone approaching. Seeing her, he half-smiled.

“Tired of the water?”

“Too cold,” she lied and laid down on her towel on her stomach.

Eleven closed her eyes and tried to push away all noise and thoughts from her ears and mind. She wanted to find a mental state in which she was at peace, almost as if she were sleeping. She knew Mike was there, just a few steps away, but her heart was keeping its normal beating pace. She just wanted to relax and enjoy a couple of hours here at the lake. She did not want to think about anything that could trouble her feelings, nor wanted to feel nervousness.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” Mike’s voice infiltrated her ears.

Eleven opened her eyes and turned her head, laying her chin on the towel, to look at Mike.

He had put down his book and was looking at her, waiting for an answer.

She wanted to relax for a couple of hours. No fast beating hearts. No big emotions. No Mike. No-

“Yes,” she heard herself saying.

They didn’t warn the others they were leaving. They just stood up, put on their flip flops and walked towards the forest.

They walked around for a while in silence. Eleven regretted not bringing her dress since it was a bit chilly under the tree's shadows. Mike had not brought his t-shirt as well and Eleven could see it in his skin that he was getting shivers.

"Where are we going?" She asked.

"Wander around," Mike replied. He took a glance at her. "Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you."

"I know that," Eleven replied with a frown. "I know you."

"You do?" Mike stopped still and turned to her. "How?"

She shrugged.

"I'm good at reading people," she lied. Actually, she just spent months after months staring at Mike and trying to read every move he made.

Mike managed to give her a small smile.

"No, you're not," he said.

Eleven blinked, and felt offended despite the fact he was right.

"Yes, I am," she insisted.

Mike chuckled and shook his head.

"You're really not, El."

El.

He had never called her El.

"Why did you call me El?" She asked.

Mike blinked.

"Max calls you that sometimes. I guess it got stuck in my mind."

"No," Eleven replied with a frown and crossed her arms in front of

her stomach to keep herself warm. "Max calls me Ellie."

Mike stared at her for a few seconds before looking away. If he were not so pale, Eleven would not have noticed how red his cheekbones started to turn.

"I guess... I guess that's what I call you," Mike confessed. "When I think about you."

Eleven blinked.

Did... Did he just confess to think about her? Did her daydream, the guy she kept dreaming about every night and every day, just say he also thought about her?

But how could it be?

Suddenly, there was a hand over Eleven's crossed arms.

"El," Mike said, pulling her arms away from her body and stepping closer, "If I'm crossing the line, please stop me."

And then, he started to lean in.

Eleven's heart beat fast and she forgot how to breath for a second.

But she had to breathe. Mike was about to kiss her.

Mike Wheeler was going to kiss her.

Eleven took a deep breath right before Mike's lips met hers.

*"You can't have a crush on Mike," Max said with her eyes wide-opened.*

*Eleven had just confessed to her best friend her crush on Mike. After months of keeping it to herself, Eleven had to share those feelings with Max.*

*"W-why?" Eleven felt heart-broken. Why couldn't she like Mike?*

*"Because he... he doesn't know how to like someone, Ellie. Not since his parents died."*

Mike spent the entire month of August with his two sisters in Ohio. Eleven didn't see him once nor talked to him on the phone because one, he didn't call her, and two, she didn't have the guts to call him.

Especially after what Max had told her.

Eleven confessed to her best friend her feelings about Mike three days after he had gone away to Ohio. She assumed that telling Max then would give her time to assimilate Eleven's confession and act like she did not know about her friend's feelings nor the kiss that she and Mike had shared when he returned to Hawkins. Of course, Max hadn't even let her get to the part in which they had kissed in the forest.

He didn't know how to like someone, Max had told her. Because his parents were dead and he thought he didn't deserve that kind of happiness. He had only started having friends after his sister, Nancy, talked to him. Max told Eleven that he had spent the last Christmas holidays with his sisters and that was when Nancy finally convinced him to get friends. Lucas and Will started showing up at Max's house after that.

Eleven was arriving at Max's house (they had made plans to spend the afternoon eating ice-cream and watching TV) when she saw Troy Harrington. He was leaning against his red car and looking at the yellow house that belonged to his ex-girlfriend.

Eleven frowned, wondering what he was doing there, and started walking towards him.

Troy heard her and turned his head. He smiled.

"Hey, Jane."

"Hey, Troy. What are you doing here?" She asked him.

"I'm here to tell Max that I did good in summer camp. Did not kiss anyone. We can date again."

Eleven tried to control a laugh.

"Troy," she started and was tempted to touch his shoulder in a

comforting way, “Max doesn’t like you anymore.”

Troy blinked and looked down at his feet, taking in Eleven’s words.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he said after a while and stood up straight. He turned to her. “Are you seeing someone, Jane?”

Eleven snorted.

“No, but I’m not going to start seeing you either, Troy. That’s for sure,” she replied.

Troy frowned.

“Why not?”

“Because you used to date Max. She’s my best friend.”

“She doesn’t like me that way anymore.”

“Still. Bro code.”

“You guys aren’t bros,” Troy replied.

“We’re sisters,” Eleven said, rolling her eyes.

“But, Jane, one date wouldn’t hurt!” Troy exclaimed. “You don’t even have to tell her.”

“I will tell her nonetheless,” Eleven said.

There was a quiet moment between the two of them.

“So, you want to go on a date with me?”

Eleven thought about Mike Wheeler and his stupid pretty face. He didn’t know how to like someone. Did Troy Harrington know?

“Sure.”

“Great. Tomorrow at Benny’s?”

“Pick me up or I won’t show up,” Eleven replied and started to walk

towards Max's house.

"At seven, then!"

"Fine!" She said back.

Eleven finally came face to face with the Winter's door. She blinked, confused for a moment with what she had just done.

She was going on a date with Troy Harrington. What the hell had gone through her mind?

She had to tell Max.

Eleven knocked on the door, anxious. Billy came to open it, told her Max was in her bedroom and Eleven ran upstairs.

"I'm going on a date with Troy," she said right after opening her best friend's bedroom door.

Max, who had been reading a magazine, looked up and frowned, surprised with that information.

"I'm sorry," Eleven said as she closed the door. "He was outside, and we talked and I told him you weren't into him anymore and suddenly he asked me on a date and I said no, but then he asked again and I was like *what the hell, why not?*, and I'm so sorry!" Eleven sat in front of her best friend with begging eyes.

Max stared at Eleven with a frown between her eyebrows. Then, she closed the magazine she had been reading and leaned forwards, grabbing Eleven's hands.

"El," she started. "He's a terrible talker, but a great kisser."

Eleven blinked twice.

"W-what?"

"If I were you, I'd cut the chit chat fast and just get to kissing him," Max explained and then pulled her hands back. "That's my best advice to deal with Troy."



Eleven blinked again, even more confused. She looked around, as if she were sure she was in another dimension. But no, she was with Max, in her bedroom, talking about Eleven going on a date with Max's ex-boyfriend and her friend was cool with it.

"I'm confused."

"What? I don't like him that way anymore, and you need to get over, you know, that silly crush you have on my cousin."

Eleven suddenly felt like shit.

She knew Max was being the best friend she had always been to Eleven. Treating her crush on Mike like this was one of ways of Max being a good friend. The two of them always looked out for each other. But it hurt. It hurt because Eleven spent months daydreaming about Mike. She got to kiss him! Jesus, he had kissed her and Max didn't even know that. And now, ... now, Eleven didn't even want to tell her that that kiss had happened.

"Okay, then," Eleven murmured. "I'll kiss him a lot, I guess."

Max chuckled.

"You do that, Ellie."

And she did, the next night, at Benny's diner after eating her burger. Max had been right when she said Troy was a terrible talker. He didn't know how to carry on a conversation with someone else.

So, when the opportunity came, Eleven asked Troy to get the check. They both paid for the meal, since Eleven did not like the all gentleman thing of the guy paying for her meal, and then turned to the diner's exit.

To her surprise, when she opened the diner's door to leave, Lucas and Will came in.

"Hey, Eleven," they greeted.

Eleven panicked for a second. She looked over at Troy, who was looking at the older boys with a suspicious gaze.

“Hey Lucas. Hey Will. This is Troy.”

“Hello there,” Troy greeted.

“What’s up, man?” Lucas said and Will gave him a small push.  
“What?”

“Stop making ‘What’s up, man?’ your greeting line. You’re not going to chit chat with them,” Will stated.

Lucas rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Maybe I am going to chit chat.”

“We actually have to leave,” Eleven stepped in.

“Oh yeah? Then,” Lucas opened the door for them, “have a good night!”

“Night, El,” Will said with a kind smile.

Eleven was astonished for a moment, frozen to the ground. Troy had to push her out of the door.

El. Will called her El. Only Mike called her that...

*“I guess... I guess that’s what I call you... when I think about you.”*

Did he talk about her too?

“Who were they?” Troy asked after they left the diner.

“Friends of a friend,” Eleven muttered.

When they got to the car, Troy turned to her, “So, where do you want to go? I know a great bar nearb-“

Eleven kissed him.

She would not spend two more hours hearing Troy talking about nonsense before he tried to make a move on her. So, she kissed him, since that was where he wanted the night to end, and she would get rid of him in one hour tops.

Max had been right about Troy's kissing skills. He was good.

But not as good as Mike.

*"You have a boyfriend now?" Mike asked her.*

*Eleven stopped walking and closed her eyes. Why did they always meet on her way to or from the bathroom?*

*"No," Eleven replied, turning on her heels.*

*Mike was standing at his bedroom's doorway, leaning against it.*

*"Max made a joke the other day about it," he commented. "And Lucas and Will said they saw you with a guy a couple weeks ago."*

*"I do not have a boyfriend," Eleven replied.*

*Mike stared at her.*

*"Good."*

*She frowned.*

*"Good?"*

*"Yeah, good," he said and walked in to his bedroom. He left the door open. He never left the door open.*

Max would kill her if she found out.

Eleven had gone after Mike that day, the day he had left his bedroom's door open for her to follow him. She had completely forgotten her need to pee and followed him. After she had got in, he had closed the door, pushed her against it gently and kissed her.

Why did she let herself be kissed by Mike?

Now,... now it was an addiction.

Whenever Max wasn't around, Mike would steal a kiss or two from her. Sometimes, Eleven would pretend to go call her mother, or to go to the bathroom, and she would get into his bedroom instead. He

didn't ask her for anything, he didn't push her to come to him, but she did anyways. It was good. So good to kiss him.

"Where's Max?" Mike asked her on one warm September afternoon.

"Downstairs, preparing us a snack," Eleven replied.

She was standing at his bedroom's doorway. He was sitting at his desk, with his computer turned on in front of him.

"Do we have time?" He asked her.

"Five minutes, maybe."

Mike smiled warmly at her. Eleven's heart skipped a beat.

"Come in, then."

And she did, closing the door behind her. She approached him and stopped a few centimetres away from him. Mike grabbed her hands and pulled her closer, pulling her to his lap. Eleven's arms went around his neck and he leaned in to kiss her.

Mike's lips were soft and warm against hers. They made her feel a million things at the same time. They made her want him more and more.

Why did this keep happening? She couldn't let him do it, but she did. Because she was addicted. And she liked him.

*I have to stop liking him.*

Mike didn't know how to like someone. That was what Max had told her during summer vacation. He refused to let himself be happy because his parents weren't alive to be happy and to see him be happy.

If he was like this, then why was he playing with her feelings?

"Maybe he doesn't know you like him," Jennifer said while braiding her hair.

Eleven tried to turn her head, but Jennifer didn't let her.

"Be still. I'm almost finished."

"What do you mean, he doesn't know I like him? We have been fooling around for, what, almost two months now?"

Mike had come back from his holidays on August 25<sup>th</sup>. She knew that because she had refused to go to Max's house that day and the two of them spent the afternoon in the public swimming pool.

When Mike first confronted her with the boyfriend question, it had been August 30<sup>th</sup>. Now, they were halfway through October, almost in November. Max still did not know what she and Mike had been doing. Max actually believed that Eleven was over her stupid crush. If she knew... God, if she knew how much Eleven had fallen for Mike since August....

Because he was nice to her, and kind, and gentle and... How could he not know how to like someone? How could he not know that she had feelings for him? She was so obvious...

"If, for him, this is only a way of spending the time, then, he won't know you like him, Ellie, because he'll think it's also a way of spending the time for you."

Eleven broke away from Jennifer's hands and turned to her friend.

"Oh, the braid is going to be ruined!"

"A way of spending the time?!" Eleven almost shouted.

Jennifer noticed that there were tears in her friend's eyes.

"Oh, Ellie, I- I shouldn't have put it in that way."

But it was already too late. Eleven started to cry.

Jennifer hugged her and stroke her back.

"Let it all out, sweetie, let it all out."

And she did just that, along with a promise that she would step away from Mike. She wasn't going to kiss him ever again.

Eleven ignored Mike for the next weeks. Whenever he tried to kiss her or touch her, she would step away, shake her head and go meet Max wherever she was in the house. Mike didn't understand what was happening and Eleven didn't have to guts to explain to him that she was not just a way of spending the time. He wasn't that for her, so why should she be that for him?

Out of blue, Mike was gone.

At first, Eleven tried not to ask Max about him. She even pretended not to have noticed the boy's absence from the house.

Of course, it didn't last long.

"He is with his older sister," Max told her one afternoon on their way to her house. "It has been a year since, you know, their parents died."

Eleven blinked.

Of course. Mike had come to live with Max on November last year. How could she have forgotten about that?

"How is he doing?"

Max shrugged.

"I don't know. He hasn't called us since he went there... But he's coming back in three days, so, we'll see then."

After the three days were up and Mike returned, Eleven refused to go to Max's house for an entire week. She started making up excuses, saying her mother needed help at the coffee shop, or that she wasn't feeling well and would rather go home.

She didn't understand her own actions.

What was she trying to accomplish with all this? Ignoring Mike when he was in grief was a low move. Eleven knew that. It didn't matter if her feelings were being hurt too, he had lost his parents and Eleven

had completely forgotten and ignored him the weeks before their death anniversary.

What was he thinking of her? How bad of a person she was? She would.

*"What, you can't handle me?" Mike asked her.*

*Eleven had not expected him to show up at her house. She stared at him, open-mouthed.*

*"I don't get it," he continued. "Why did you do it?" There were tears in his eyes. "Why did you ignore me?"*

*"I-"*

*Mike shook his head.*

*"I shouldn't have come."*

"Stop," Eleven asked, her voice cracking.

Mike was halfway through her front yard, moving to Billy's black car. He didn't stop like she asked.

Eleven ran to him and put herself in front of him before he got to the car.

"Stop."

"Why?" He asked.

Eleven looked up at him. Her throat was dry, her hands were trembling and her stupid heart... It was beating crazily like it always did when Mike was around.

*Stop it, heart.*

"Do you think I'm just a way of spending the time?" Eleven questioned him.

Mike blinked, confused.

“W-what?”

“Is it true that you don’t know how to like someone?”

Mike stared at her, open-mouthed.

“W-what are you saying?”

“Why do you keep kissing me?” Eleven asked.

“Because I want to.”

“Okay. Now answer my other two questions,” she demanded, crossing her arms.

Wanting to kiss her didn’t mean he liked her.

Mike raised his hand to his head, looking like a very lost man who had just woken up from a dream and did not know where he was.

“I’m not understanding you, El.”

“Don’t call me El. Answer my questions.”

Mike stared at her.

“Why would you think that I think you’re just a way of spending the time?”

“Because you don’t know how to like someone. Because you refuse to be happy.”

Mike lowered his hand. He stared at her for a few seconds. Then, he shook his head.

Eleven kept staring at him, wondering what could possibly be going through his mind.

“I guess you’re right,” Mike finally said.

*“I really like your lips,” Mike whispered against her mouth.*

*Eleven smiled shyly and moved her face away. He tried to follow her, to*



*get to her lips again. She stood up from his bed.*

*"I have to go back to Max."*

*Mike stared at her.*

*"I do."*

*"Okay."*

*She left his bedroom.*

"Don't agree with me," she asked. "Fight for yourself."

Mike shrugged.

"What do you want me to say, El? I don't know how to be happy. Do you think..." He sighed. "Do you think I don't know that? I have nightmares, okay? About my parents. About how they come back from the dead to judge me because I'm happy. My sisters don't have that. They are sad and cry once in a while, but they... they don't have this guilt inside of them."

Eleven felt tears in her eyes. She felt one escaping her eye and Mike just stared at her, with his own tears in his eyes.

"I'm not going to make you happy, if that's what you want me to say."

"I d-don't," Eleven replied shakily.

"Then what do you want from me?"

She didn't know.

Did she?

"I'm going to go now," Mike muttered and went around her.

If she let him go now, whatever had been happening between them would be more than over. Did Eleven want that? Did she want Mike Wheeler to walk out of her life like this?

If he didn't fight for himself, why wouldn't she do it for him? Why would she just let him walk away? He had not once said he didn't like her back... He had not once said she had been a way of spending the time.

Why was she overreacting the all thing?

"Don't go," she asked, not turning around.

Mike stopped walking and looked over his shoulder.

"Don't ignore me, then" he replied.

Eleven finally turned around.

"I'll make you happy and not guilty about it," she said.

Mike half-smiled.

"Is that a promise?"

Eleven nodded. "Yes."

## 2. Chapter 2

*“So, you went back to what you were doing before? With no more explanations or changes?” Jennifer Hayes asked with a frowning expression.*

*Eleven sighed and laid back on her sofa. On the TV, you could see a random episode of Keeping Up with the Kardashians on. Jennifer had a serious obsession with that show.*

*“I want to make him happy. What if this is the way to start?”*

Max didn't know yet. And she would not know for a while. Eleven felt terrible, almost stomach sick, after coming to this decision. She had never kept anything from Max. In ten years of friendship, Max and Eleven pretty much shared every little detail of their lives with each other. Even when they spent a weekend away from each other, on Monday, they would always tell each other what they had done, and what they had done was most likely boring as hell. Either way, you'd find them whispering to each other during their first class of the day, telling each other how their weekend had been like.

But this... this thing with Mike, it needed to be kept a secret from Max and most people for a while. Eleven needed to make him happy before anyone's opinion could influence them.

She needed to understand for herself what the thing with him was too.

“It was your birthday, wasn't it?” Mike asked her out of blue.

They were laying on a blanket by the lake. Yes, that lake. The one where they had gone during summer vacation, and Mike had invited her for a walk and had kissed her for the first time. But now the lake was frozen and the trees surrounding it were full of snow. Billy's black car was just a few meters away. Mike had borrowed his cousin's car with no trouble since Billy slept during the day. Max had gone to Dustin Henderson's house for a work project. Eleven took the opportunity and asked Mike for a day out, just the two of them, to somewhere no one could see them. He had brought them here.

“Y-yeah,” she murmured, hiding her face against Mike’s chest since her nose was feeling cold and he was warm.

“Did you celebrate it?” He asked.

“I had a cake with my mom and Max gave me a t-shirt.”

Mike sighed.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

Mike didn’t reply straightaway.

“I- I don’t know.”

Eleven raised her head. He looked at her. His eyes weren’t as sad as they used to be, but there wasn’t much of what could be called emotion in them either. Mike was living in a limbo between wanting to feel and feeling guilty about that wish.

“It has been over a month, Mike.”

He blinked and looked away, ending the conversation.

Eleven sighed and hid her face on his warm coat again. Her nose was always terribly cold during Winter days. Her nose and hands, the two worst things she had to face from November to February.

“Was it a bad idea to come here, wasn’t it?” Mike asked.

Eleven sniffled.

“It’s just... a bit cold.”

“The weatherman said it wouldn’t be this cold,” Mike complained.

Eleven found herself smiling.

After he had told her he planned to take them to the lake, Eleven put on as many layers of clothes as possible, also wearing a very old pair of fur boots she had found somewhere in her closet. Mike had

shown up with as many layers as she had, plus a black beanie. Eleven had stared at him, her heart beating fast (because it always beat fast when Mike was around), taking in how pretty her not-boyfriend-yet-she-wished-he-was looked.

“It’s okay, Mike,” she replied and raised herself, holding her body up with her elbow. She took a good look at him. “We’re together. That’s what matters.”

He raised an eyebrow, doubtful. Eleven leaned down and kissed him softly, their lips barely touching. She pulled back a few millimetres, looked him in the eyes, and then kissed him again. She felt his lips curling into a smile against hers.

*“Mike hasn’t called,” Max remarked, upset. Eleven pretended that that information was less interesting to her than the TV show they had been watching. But it wasn’t. It was much more. Because he hadn’t called her either. “My mom sometimes goes bananas because she wants him to call her and tell her everything is okay, but he doesn’t. It’s like, he doesn’t even care about people around him.”*

*“He’s with his sisters, right?” Eleven asked, pretending she didn’t know that.*

*Max nodded.*

*“Yeah, they always spent holidays with each other.”*

Mike came back from Christmas holidays two days after school began. Mrs. Winter and he sat down in the kitchen for a long chat in which she explained to him that it really made her sad that he didn’t call her during the time he was away. He was her nephew and she cared deeply about him. She needed to know how he was doing.

Mike nodded, understood her words and apologized, saying he would try to be better next time. Then, they hugged and the conversation was over.

Max told all this to Eleven during their Biology class. She said that Mike had even spent the previous night helping her out with her Math homework and they bounded a bit over *American Gods’*

references and jokes over Billy.

When Max got to the end of the story and went back to paying attention to class, Eleven was left alone with a sad feeling inside her stomach. She wished she had the guts to sit Mike down like Mrs. Winter had done and tell him the same thing. He hadn't called her once during Christmas holidays, nor had they seen each other since then. Of course, Eleven had avoided going to Max's house for the past few days. It was ridiculous how she handled Mike's distance towards other people. She knew how he was.

"Here." Mike had a small gift on his right hand and was giving it to Eleven.

She blinked, confused.

She had just been on her way to the bathroom (of course, she had) and Mike had opened his bedroom's door, surprising her.

"That's for me?"

Mike nodded, keeping his attention on Max's bedroom door since he knew his cousin was in there, waiting for Eleven to come back from the bathroom.

Cautiously, Eleven took the gift.

"T-thanks."

Mike nodded again and coughed, uncomfortable. "No problem."

Before Eleven could say anything else, Mike turned around and went back into his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Eleven looked at the gift in her hands. It wasn't heavy nor thick. She frowned and walked into the bathroom. There she opened the gift.

First, there was a small postcard with the image of two kittens sleeping inside a box made of waffles. She smiled softly and opened it.

In a very rounded and neat handwriting, it was written: *Sorry I didn't*

*call.*

Eleven lifted the postcard to her face and, for some reason, smelled it. It had Mike's scent on it. She shook her head and put it down on top of the closed toilet seat. She turned to the small squared box that was also part of the gift. She opened it carefully.

It was a framed picture of the two of them. Eleven recognized her light pink bikini with a ribbon on her bra and knew the photo had been taken on the day they had gone to the lake for the first time. In the photo, Mike and Eleven were sitting next to each other by the lake's border, with their legs in the water. They were both looking over their shoulders. Eleven had a small, shy smile on her face, and Mike... Mike was staring at her.

It had been Will who took that picture, she remembered suddenly. He had taken so many pictures that day she had even forgotten about that one. But Mike not, apparently.

Eleven found herself smiling like crazy, holding the picture to her chest. She looked at herself in the mirror and saw how pink her cheekbones were and how her eyes were shining. She could kiss Mike for this.

And she could. For real.

So, Eleven put the postcard of the kittens inside the small box and then closed it. She left the bathroom, completely forgotten she had gone there to pee, and knocked on Mike's bedroom door.

There was a muffled sound from inside. She heard steps getting closer, and then the door was opened. Mike stared at her. She smiled at him.

"Thank you so much."

Mike lowered his eyes at the unwrapped gift in her hands. His cheeks turned into a deep red.

"You're welcome."

"Can I see you tonight?"

Mike blinked, surprised.

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, it’s Friday night. My mom goes out with her friends almost every Friday night. I’m always alone at home until midnight.”

Mike found himself nodding. And he kept on nodding until Eleven giggled.

“Deal.”

"Cool," she said.

“Cool,” he repeated and watched as Eleven went back to his cousin’s bedroom.

Thankfully, Max was talking on the phone and had her back turned to the door when Eleven got in. So, she managed to put Mike’s gift inside her schoolbag before her best friend ended the call and turned around.

“Dustin’s so sweet, don’t you think?”

Eleven blinked, surprised with her best friend’s sudden observation on their classmate.

“He has always been sweet, Max.”

Max sighed and laid down on her bed.

“Yeah, I guess.”

*“I want to go to University of Indiana,” Mike told her, while playing with her fingers. They were laying on her bed, facing each other. It was almost eleven pm. Eleven’s mom was still out with her friends.*

*“That’s where your sister is studying, right?”*

*Mike nodded.*

*“She finishes this year, but she is going to stick around since the newspaper where she is doing her internship wants to offer her a job.”*



*“That’s good,” Eleven commented. Mike half-smiled at her answer. “What will you study?”*

*“History. I like History a lot.”*

“Why are you staring at books about ancient history?” Max asked her best friend with a puzzled expression on her face.

Eleven had dragged her into a bookshop to buy some books. Max had loved the idea since she hadn’t read a book in a while and could use a new one to entertain her from school, but that was until her best friend got stuck in the section of books about historical events and had yet left it.

“I’m interested,” Eleven replied, trying to keep it cool. She touched the cover of a book about the twentieth century’s wars and wrinkled her nose. Mike had probably already read a lot on that subject.

“Since when?” Max inquired, feeling lost. She didn’t remember *once* hearing Eleven talking about history, unless they were talking about school and tests.

Eleven sighed. Why did she think it was a clever idea to bring Max with her on her secret demand to get Mike a gift? Now, she was getting suspicious.

“Ellie?” Max called.

Eleven made up her mind and grabbed a book about Ancient Greece.

“Since I felt like reading about history, Max,” she finally replied and marched to the cashier.

“Ooo-kaaay.” Max followed her.

She waited until Eleven had paid and they were out of the bookshop to start talking again, “But when, exactly?!”

Eleven sighed.

“Recently, okay?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, Max. I just feel like reading this.”

Max stared at her, disbelieving. Eleven kept looking forwards, trying to act normal, like, you know, buying a book about Ancient Greece was an ordinary thing for her to do even though she had indeed zero interest in history. She liked it a lot at school, but that was it.

At home, Eleven found old wrapping paper in the attic, inside one of the many boxes in which her mother kept things that she did not want to throw away, but also had not space for them downstairs.

After choosing the best wrapping paper to wrap Mike’s gift, that is, a black and dark blue paper, she went to the kitchen and place everything she needed on top of the table. She had scissors, tape, the wrapping paper and the book. She wanted to do a cute ribbon like her mother did on their Christmas gifts, but there was no paper for that. Her mother bought a special, shiny paper and used the scissors to give it a curvy look. Eleven loved them.

She was finishing wrapping the book when she suddenly heard her mother’s keys being inserted into the door’s keyhole. Eleven panicked for a second, glued the last piece of tape on the wrapping paper and then grabbed everything and ran to the living-room to hide it inside the sofa’s hidden spot. If you lift the sofa’s right pad, it would open. Eleven and her mother usually kept blankets there. She now threw in the wrapping paper and Mike’s gift.

She was putting the scissors and the tape inside one of the living-room’s drawers when her mother showed up at the room’s entrance. She had a tired smile on her face.

“Hello, sweetie.”

“Hey, Mama.” Eleven went to her and kissed her cheek. “How was work?”

“Tiring. People love cakes nowadays. Did you know that?”

“They always have, Mama.” Eleven smiled sweetly.

Terry Ives smiled back and touched her daughter's curly hair. It was getting longer, almost past her shoulders.

"Aren't you going to get your hair cut soon?"

Eleven shrugged and grabbed her mother's hand to pull her away from the living-room. She had to find something to distract her mother with, so she could get the things from under the sofa.

"I think it's fine like it is, isn't it?"

"It's longer than the usual," Terry remarked, touching her hair again. "It's losing the curls because it's getting bigger."

Eleven shrugged again and sat her mother down at the kitchen table.

"I like it, Mama. Now sit while I prepare you a tea."

Terry Ives was a tea lover. She had had an addiction on coffee many years ago, but lost it when Eleven was around the age of five. It had come to a point in which Terry was drinking fifteen cups of coffee per day, barely sleeping at night and working too much because of the adrenaline rushes the drink gave her, and that could not possibly be good to her in the future. So, Terry started decreasing the number of coffees she drank a day until she finally got rid of it, and was now into tea. But not black tea. That one had an elevated level of caffeine.

"Did you use wrapping paper today?"

Eleven, who had just put a cup of water inside the microwave, stopped still, scared.

"W-what?" She looked behind her shoulder.

Her mother was holding a bit of the black and dark blue wrapping paper that she had used for the gift. She probably found it on one of the chairs, having fallen while Eleven did the wrapping.

"Y-yeah," Eleven confessed and turned on the microwave. She put it on for two minutes and went to the cupboards to get a camomile small package.

“What for?”

“Ah, a gift,” Eleven said, taking one of the packages from the box and then putting it back inside the cupboard.

“To whom?”

Eleven turned around and leaned against the counter. She licked her lips nervously.

“Jennifer.”

Terry Ives frowned, looking at her daughter with a bit of doubt.

“Jennifer Hayes?” Eleven nodded. “Is it her birthday soon?”

“N-no. I... just felt like buying her a gift.”

“Oh,” Terry let out. She grabbed a few more pieces of wrapping paper from the chair next to her and stood up. “What did you get her?” Terry asked her daughter as she walked past and went to the trash bin near the store room’s door.

“A book.”

“Oh, interesting. About what?”

Eleven closed her eyes. The sound of the microwaving working was the only thing that was heard in the Ives’ kitchen for a few seconds.

Finally, Eleven said, “Ancient Greece.”

Terry Ives stopped in the middle of her way to the chair and stared at her daughter.

“Jennifer Hayes likes Ancient Greece?”

Eleven nodded, biting her tongue. Why couldn’t she lie to her mother?

Suddenly, the microwave beeped. She went to it and took out the hot cup of water. She unstuck the small strand fixed on the camomile package and then put it inside the hot water.

“Jane, sweetie,” Terry called for her daughter.

Eleven grabbed a spoon, the sugar pot and the cup of tea, and walked over to the table. She placed all the things on top of it, then turned to her mother, gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and said, “I’m going to change to my pyjamas, Mama.”

*Mike stared at the unwrapped book in his hands. Eleven bit her bottom lip nervously, waiting for some sort of reaction from him.*

“W-why?” He finally asked.

*Eleven frowned.*

“You said you liked history.”

*“But why buy me a book?” Mike raised his head to look at her. Eleven saw how confused he was.*

*Had it been a bad move to get him the book? Had it been too much? But he got her that photograph of them and the postcard...*

*“Because I wanted to,” Eleven replied weakly. “Because I want to see you happy.”*

Eleven kept the photograph of her and Mike hidden in one of her night table’s drawers. She wanted desperately to put it in display, but having to face her mother or Max asking questions about it scared her deeply. Especially Max. She was completely horrified with herself from keeping the secret thing she had with Mike from Max. But it had also been her decision, so...

“I think I want to date Will.”

Eleven stared at Max for a long time.

“Is it a bad idea?” Her friend asked, apprehensive.

Eleven nodded.

“W-why?”

Eleven gulped. How could she explain to her best friend that Will was gay, when she had got that information from Mike? Then, how could she explain in which case scenario had Mike told her that fact about his friend Will without giving away that they had been in Mike's bed making out and then started talking about random things?

"I just... He doesn't- Well-"

Max waved her hand.

"Never mind. It was a stupid thought, anyways."

Placing an elbow on the table and holding her head up with her hand, Max started to play with her milkshake's straw melancholically.

Eleven knew something was wrong.

"What's happened?"

Max sighed.

"I don't know... I guess... Well, I'm spending too much time with Dustin Henderson."

Eleven blinked.

"And that made you want to date Will?"

"Well, yeah, because- You know, what? Never mind, really."

Eleven stretched a hand over the table and touched Max's arm. Her friend looked at her through her eyelashes.

"We're best friends, Max. You can tell me anything."

After saying those words, Eleven felt a painful shame inside her chest. She took a deep breath and forced a smile at Max, pretending she hadn't just been a total fake person by saying that.

Max raised her head and lowered her arm on the table.

"Well, ... Will is cute, right?"

Eleven shrugged. Max rolled her eyes.

“He is, you just have bad taste in men, Ellie.”

“Hey.”

“Anyways, Dustin... Well... he is cute, but... he isn’t- Well, he isn’t-”

“Good Lord, Max,” Eleven interrupted her after understanding where Max was getting at. “Don’t you dare. Jesus, you have to stop thinking like that!”

Her best friend frowned, offended.

“What do you mean?”

“You have all this messed-up idea that only a certain type of guy can be accepted as cute or handsome. Beauty is relative, Max.” She grabbed both her friend’s hands. “Look at us! The boys you think are cute, I don’t, and the ones I think that are, you don’t! But that does not mean that they are... less attractive. Beauty is a point of view, Max. So what you think Dustin is cute and you like him? Think he is cute and like him! Who is there to stop you?”

*Who is there to stop me from falling for Mike?*

Max was left open-mouthed with her best friend’s speech. Eleven had never been one to be very passionate about her own opinions. She had them, she kept them for herself and lived her life. It was funny how she is now teaching Max how to think differently when usually it was Max that tried to give her life lessons.

“You really think it’s okay for me to like him?”

Eleven nodded.

“Of course. And you should totally act on it, Max,” Eleven added.

“W-what? Are you crazy?” Max sounded scared with the idea of confessing her feelings about Dustin to Dustin himself.

“No, Max, but Dustin is. About you.”

“He is?!”

“For the last past two years, yeah.”

Max’s eyes went wide-opened.

“R-really?”

Eleven nodded frenetically.

“Yeah. You are the only one that hasn’t seen it, Max.”

Max leaned back on her comfy chair, taking in all this new information.

Around them, the most popular coffee shop of Hawkins was filled with noise and people. Eleven’s mother was at the cashier, dealing with an endless line of costumers who had come to pick up cakes to take home. The waitresses and waters of the coffee shop had not stopped for a second since Eleven and Max had got there and asked for their milkshakes. But the two girls were oblivious to all this as Max realizes that she indeed liked Dustin Henderson very much and he, to her surprise, had actually liked her for the past two years.

“I have to tell him how I feel,” Max said, looking up at Eleven. “I’m going to tell him that he’s, like, the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Eleven laughed at her friend’s words, and then nodded, encouraging to do so.

Abruptly, Max leaned over the table, grabbed Eleven’s face and kissed her on the cheek loudly.

“What would I do without you, Ellie?”

Eleven half-closed her eyes, pretending to think.

“You’d probably... die, or something.”

They both laughed.

“Anyways,” Max pulled back, sitting comfortably again on her chair,



“what boys do you think are cute? Because I think I heard you admitting you found boys cute and- Oh wait.” Max suddenly started nodded. “My cousin. You thought he was cute.”

Eleven looked down at her empty milkshake before nodding. She tried not to give away guilty vibes to her best friend and, for some stupid reason, decided to take the straw out of the long glass and bit it.

Max stared at her, confused.

“What? You’re embarrassed about it now?”

Eleven shook her head.

“N-no. I just... I forgot you remembered that.”

Max laughed.

“Well, I didn’t until this talk. Anyways, it’s my cousin.”

Eleven frowned.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“He can be cute, but.... Thank God you no longer have a crush on him.”

Eleven’s heart squeezed inside her chest.

“W-why?”

“I think he is seeing someone.”

Everything stopped.

Suddenly, all the background noise and people in the coffee shop just vanished and Eleven was alone, hearing on repeat those words.

*I think he is seeing someone.*

*I think he is seeing someone.*

*I think he-*

“W-why do you say that?” Eleven managed to ask, and then bit firmly her straw.

Max shrugged.

“Do you know how he always looked so sad and would like...stare at nowhere?” Eleven pretended not to know very well, despite knowing exactly what Max meant. Watching him gazing into nowhere with those sad eyes had been one of the first things about Mike that had captivated Eleven. “Well, anyways, he now does that, but... there’s another look. Like... a dreamy look.”

Dreamy look.

Eleven blinked.

“And I’ve caught him talk to Lucas and Will about a girl,” Max added. “I don’t know who, but, who knows, if it is as serious as it sounds, maybe he’ll bring her home someday?”

Eleven’s heart skipped a beat.

Was she and Mike as serious as it sounded?

Or was Max talking about someone else?

Maybe Mike liked someone else... Maybe Eleven had opened that door for him and now he was falling in love with some girl he had met in Indiana, or in his class, or-

Eleven stood up abruptly.

“I gotta pee.”

She cried for a couple of minutes inside one of the bathroom stalls. Then, she cleaned her face with toilet paper, blew her nose twice, and went to face Max again with a fake smile. Her friend did not notice the redness in her eyes.

*Mike’s hand touched Eleven’s chin and he made her look up at him.*

*Eleven felt shy under his gaze. He half-smiled at her and leaned in to kiss her softly.*

*Eleven pulled back. She sat up, leaving Mike lying down on his bed alone. On the other side of the corridor, Max was asleep, thinking her best friend was by her side. Eleven had left the bedroom hours ago.*

*“What’s wrong?” Mike asked.*

*Eleven looked at the clock. It was almost five am. She had to get some sleep. She and Max were going hiking the next morning.*

*“I have to sleep.”*

*“Sleep here.”*

*Eleven shook her head.*

*“I won’t be able to sleep with your hands being all sneaky.”*

*Mike chuckled softly. Her heart beat fast.*

*“Max said you were saying someone,” Eleven suddenly said, instead of getting up and leaving Mike’s bedroom.*

*Mike frowned and sat up on his bed.*

*“Why did she say that?”*

*Eleven didn’t dare to look at him.*

*“She said she has overheard you talk to Lucas and Will about a girl. And that you... you daydream a lot too.”*

*Mike raised an eyebrow.*

*“Daydream?”*

*Eleven nodded, still not looking at him.*

*“Yeah, you know, ... you’re lost in thoughts... like, good thoughts.”*

*Mike sighed*

“El,-“

She finally looked at him.

“Are you seeing someone?” She dared to ask.

Mike didn’t hesitate in answering, “Yes,”

It felt like Eleven’s heart had stopped for a second. Then, it started beating crazily, but not the good kind of crazy it usually beat when it was around Mike, it was a bad one, a sad one...

“You,” Mike suddenly added. He touched Eleven’s face and made her look at him before he said, “I’m seeing you, El. Wasn’t that the deal we had? Wasn’t that the promise we made?”

*I’ll make you happy and not guilty about it.*

Eleven blinked, suddenly confused with what he was saying. She touched the hand he had over her face. Mike leaned in and kissed her lips softly.

“I’m seeing you. You’re the girl I talk to with Lucas and Will,” he admitted. He had a dead serious expression on his face as he looked at her, making sure she understood his words. “I know I’m not good at... at this? At feeling and showing feelings... I know it’s hard to see that I am happy because-“ Mike closed his eyes for a second. “It’s hard to be happy, you know?”

Eleven found herself nodding and moving closer to him. Mike’s arm went around her waist, pulling her even closer. His forehead touched hers.

“You know..., my mom was going to divorce my dad.”

Eleven stared at him, dumbfounded.

“W-what?”

Mike nodded, his forehead moving gently against hers.

“Yeah... I was the only one that knew. My mother confessed it to me

one night. She was drunk on wine. My dad was having a night off with his co-workers. I went to the kitchen to grab something to eat and she, she sat there, with a glass of wine in front of her and said-

*"I want to divorce your dad," Karen Wheeler confessed to her only son.*

*Mike, seventeen at the time, blinked, one of his hands on the fridge's door and the other on his hair, which he had been scratching.*

*Karen Wheeler sighed and took a sip from her wine.*

*"W-why?" Mike dared to ask.*

*"I don't love him. I never loved him, Mike. I'm sorry."*

*Mike didn't know how to react. What was he supposed to say to his drunk mother who was confessing to have never loved his father? How was he supposed to handle the situation?*

*"You three... I love all my three children with all my heart," Karen Wheeler suddenly added. "But Ted... I don't know. I was silly. But I'm not silly anymore, Michael. I want to know what love is."*

*"She wanted to find love. And I told her okay, do it. Go find love. Maybe my dad could find love too. Maybe they could be happy, after all. But they weren't... They died. They died before they could be happy. And- And no one else knew that. So, when I got the call from the police, I-"* He closed his eyes and shook his head.

Eleven understood. That was why Mike felt guilty about being happy. That was why, out of the three Wheeler siblings, he was the one that took it worse his parents' sudden death: he had known that they had been unhappy for many years, the only thing keeping them together being their three children. He had been the only one to know that they were getting a divorce and going to search for some real happiness.

But they hadn't got a chance to be truly happy, and now Mike felt he didn't deserve that too.

"Mike," Eleven touched his face to and stroked it gently, "they would want you to be happy."

“You don’t know that. No one knows that,” he mumbled.

“They were your parents, Mike. And I know that parents always want the best for their children.”

Mike stared at her in silence.

“El, I know you’re trying to make me feel better...” She smiled weakly. Mike shook his head. “But it won’t work. My sister has tried. My aunt Mandy has tried. My grandparents... Lucas and Wil... Everyone has tried, El. I just... I can’t keep the nightmares away.”

Eleven didn’t know what to do or say at first. She wanted to take all the pain Mike was feeling and throw it somewhere else... No, she wanted to make it disappear. She wanted to make it burn until it was dust. No more pain for Mike. She wanted him to smile again and be freely happy.

It was the nightmares that kept him from being happy. So, it was the nightmares she would fight for him.

Eleven’s hand, which had been laying on Mike’s soft face, slid into his hair. She grabbed it firmly and pulled Mike into a soft kiss. He was surprised at first, letting out a small gasp, but then kissed her back.

The kiss grew passionately. Eleven went on her knees, her body hovering over Mike’s, both her hands grabbing his hair, keeping him closer. Then, she pushed Mike onto the bed and fell on top of him.

Mike’s hands moved to her back, under the t-shirt she had borrowed from Max to sleep in. He stroked her soft skin, his fingers rough against it. His bitten nails trying to dig into her skin.

Eleven pulled back just a few millimetres, their lips still tenderly touching. Mike opened his eyes. They were filled with a light. A light that Eleven had yet seen in them.

“I’m going to keep the nightmares away for you,” she promised against his lips.

*“Dates are overrated,” Billy commented with Mike and his friends.*

*Max, who was also in the living-room with Eleven playing a board game on the dining table, snorted at her brother.*

*"That's because you don't get anyone to go on a date with you," she fired back.*

*Will and Lucas chuckled at her response. Billy sent a death glare at his younger sister.*

*"Like you're one to talk," Billy replied.*

*Eleven looked over at Mike, who was sitting in one of the sofa's corner seats. He had a hand holding up his head and a bored look on his face. Billy had made him and his friends watch some random football game.*

*"Right, Billy. I bet Eleven and I have gone on more dates alone than you have in twenty-one years. And we're only sixteen."*

*Billy laughed at that like it was the funniest joke on the world.*

*Mike raised his head and looked over at Eleven with a small frown. She wondered what he was thinking.*

*"I never liked dates," Mike confessed after Eleven told him that Max was on a date with Dustin Henderson right now. They had gone to a paintball court together in Indianapolis.*

*Eleven frowned, laying contentedly back on Billy's comfy car seats. Mike had borrowed his cousin's car again and was taking them for a ride.*

*"I never liked the gentleman shit in dates," Eleven admitted.*

*Mike glanced at her.*

*"The gentleman shit?"*

*"Yeah, like, paying my meal, opening the car's door for me, and the whatever-place-we-are-going-to's door as well, getting the chair... I just... I can do that stuff, you know? I do it just fine on my own, just because I'm on a date it doesn't mean I lost the ability to do them."*

Mike chuckled softly. He made a right on the intersection and Eleven saw the big billboard saying goodbye to Hawkins' visitors. She frowned.

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere."

Eleven stared at him with a raised eyebrow. Mike noticed and chuckled again.

"What, scared that I'll hurt you?"

She rolled her eyes.

"I know you won't."

"Because you know me?" He teased. They both remembered clearly how Eleven had once used that argument against him in a conversation that went exactly like this one. But back then, Eleven had used that argument stupidly since she just thought she knew who Mike was. Back then, she knew the guy she daydreamed about, the illusion that haunted her heart and dreams, her best friend's cousin... Now, now she was getting to know the real Mike.

"Yes, because I know you," she agreed and smiled at him.

She loved knowing the real Mike, even if it wasn't the real-real Mike. Not yet, at least. They were getting there. He was getting there.

Shortly after, Mike stopped in front of an ice-cream shop. The shop was a small, yet lengthy building painted white, and with one spacey window while the entrance was a small, yellow door. Its name was *Camila's*. Eleven had never heard of it.

"Where are we?"

"Hum, Connersville, I think," Mike said, opening the car's door on his side. "Let's go?"

Eleven nodded, took off her seatbelt and got out of the car.



When she met Mike in front of the car, his hand touched hers.

Eleven thought it had been a mistake, that it had just happened because they were too close to each other, but then he touched her hand again and this time he grabbed it and intertwined their fingers together.

They walked into the ice-cream shop together. Eleven noticed how big the counter was. It was made of glass, and it separated the costumers from all the ice-cream flavours the shop offered. Eleven stared at it, agape.

“My sister sometimes takes me here when I’m with her. Holly loves it. Her favourite is the Kit Kat flavour.”

Eleven looked at him and smiled.

“And yours?”

“Strawberry and vanilla.”

Eleven couldn’t help, but chuckled.

“That’s such a normal choice,” she judged him.

Mike blinked.

“Am I supposed to be offended by that?”

“Only if you want to,” Eleven said cheekily.

A tall lady with blonde, curly hair, showed up on the other side of the counter. She smiled kindly at the two of them and asked them what they were having.

Mike asked for an ice-cream cone with strawberry and vanilla flavours. Eleven went for an ice-cream of caramel and coffee.

After giving them the two ice-creams, the lady went to the cashier, which was at the end of the long counter. They followed her.

“You payin’ all together?” She asked, her eyes on Mike.

“Separated,” they said at the same time.

The lady seemed a bit confused for a second, but then nodded. She gave them the check separately.

“Did you see the look on her face?” Eleven observed after they had left the ice-cream shop. They had wandered around for a bit until they found an empty bench and sat down.

Mike nodded, taking a lick of his ice-cream.

“She was expecting the gentleman shit.”

“We could have only been friends,” she added.

“We were holding hands, El,” Mike replied.

“Oh yeah.”

Eleven felt a warming buzz in her stomach remembering how warm and rough Mike’s hand felt wrapped around hers. They had been in public, holding hands. In Hawkins, they never did that. Yikes, they didn’t even go out together in public there. Somebody would recognize them and the news would spread like a virus... Hawkins was a small town. Everyone knew how small towns worked.

Suddenly, a song started to play. Mike looked around, confused, until Eleven pushed her ice-cream into his hands and grabbed her small purse. She took her cell phone out.

“It’s Max,” she warned him before picking up. “Hey.”

“Hey, where are you?”

Eleven’s heart skipped a beat, scared.

“Why do you ask? Aren’t you with Dustin?”

“Yeah, but we’re going back already and I was wondering if you wanted to join us at Benny’s for dinner.”

Eleven moved the phone away from her ear and checked its screen.

She looked at the time.

“Isn’t it a bit early for dinner?”

“Yeah, but we get there in an hour only. And then we have to go home to shower. So, we’ll be meeting around seven at Benny’s.”

Eleven looked at Mike, who was licking his ice-cream slowly from his right hand, while holding hers with his left.

“I think I can go too.”

“Cool. Where are you?” Max asked again.

Eleven closed her eyes.

“At home.”

“Jeez, what a busy woman you are,” Max joked. Eleven heard Dustin’s muffled laugh in the back.

“Yeah, I barely have any time to sleep,” Eleven replied sarcastically.

Max laughed. She sounded really happy.

“O-kaaay. I gotta go, Ellie. See you later.”

“Bye, Eleven!” Dustin said into the phone.

Eleven smiled.

“Bye, guys.”

She put her phone back in her purse and turned to Mike to grab her ice-cream.

“It’s melting a bit,” Mike warned. On his hand, there were drops of melted ice-cream. He licked it and made a face, disgusted.

“What? It’s good,” Eleven said and licked her ice-cream.

“Too sweet.”

“Just like me,” Eleven joked with a sneaky smile.

Mike snorted.

“Right.”

Eleven pretended to be offended. “Hey, I am sweet.”

“But not sickly sweet like caramel,” Mike retorted. She gave him a frowning look. “More like... strawberry,” he explained and held up his ice-cream.

Eleven found herself blushing after understanding the meaning behind his words. She darted her look away from him and paid attention to her own ice-cream.

She was sweet like strawberry, Mike said, because he liked the taste of strawberry.

She bit her bottom lip, controlling a silly smile.

*“Have you had sex with him yet?” Jennifer asked her.*

*Eleven blinked. Slowly, her cheekbones started went red. Jennifer giggled.*

*“Is that a yes?”*

*“That’s a no,” Eleven answered.*

*“Why not?”*

*Eleven didn’t have an answer for her.*

“Okay, since it’s my birthday, I get to choose the game we’re playing,” Max announced.

Lucas rolled his eyes.

“Of course you would use that argument,” he muttered.

Max ignored him and said, “Let’s all sit in a circle, please?”

After spending the afternoon in the Winter family’s backyard, playing

games and hanging out, most of Max's guests had gone home, except Mike, who lived there, his two friends, Dustin, a girl from their Biology class called Joana, and Eleven.

Now, they had moved the party to the basement. Max's parents were at the neighbour's house having dinner, and Billy had left during the afternoon to go spend his day off at a friend's house. He most likely wouldn't come home until tomorrow morning.

Everyone sat in a circle. Eleven got to sit almost face to face with Mike. He was sitting between Lucas and Will, while she was seated next to Max and Joana. Dustin was between Lucas and Max, of course more closely to her than the other boy.

Dustin and Max were starting to enter dangerous waters when it came to their relationship status. Eleven was sure they were really close to start dating, all it needed to happen was Dustin getting the guts to do it since Max said she wouldn't. *I asked him out on, at least, the two first dates*, she had said to Eleven, *now it's his turn*.

"Okay, let's play I never."

"We don't have drinks," Lucas said.

Max sent him a cheeky smile before standing up and going to washing machine, which her mother had decided to set in the basement after getting annoyed with all the noise it did in the kitchen.

Max opened the round door of the machine and, to everyone's surprise, took out one bottle of vodka, one of lemon juice and plastic cups.

"How did you do that?" Will asked, dumbfounded.

"It was easy," Max said as she approached them. "Mom wouldn't use the washing machine during my birthday party, because *duh*, why would she? So, I hid the bottles there this morning."

She started to give out plastic cups.

"But vodka with lemon juice?" Lucas sounded offended. "That's so

girly.”

“Thank God I’m a girl, then, Lucas” Max snapped back.

He muttered an apology.

Soon, everyone’s cup was filled. Eleven took one look at the liquor inside hers and gulped. She liked drinking from time to time, but today she was not in the mood to get drunk. She got too giggly when she did, and sometimes needy. Only God knew what would happen if she got needy-drunk with Mike around.

“Who wants to start?” Max asked. No one said anything. “Good, Ellie starts.”

Eleven blinked.

“Why me?”

“Because you’re my favourite out of all,” Max said with a wink.

Dustin almost made an offended expression, but stopped himself. Eleven rolled her eyes.

“Fine. I never.... Hum...”

“Just say something to start the game,” Mike advised kindly.

She glanced at him quickly before looking down at her drink.

“I never... did homework.”

“God, that’s how we are going to play?” Lucas said before he took a sip, like everyone in the group. “We’ll get drunk fast.”

Next, it was Joana and she made everyone drink by saying, “I never watched TV.”

“I’m sooo getting drunk tonight,” Lucas said, turned to Mike.

Mike snorted, not giving a damn.

When it came to Will, he thought for a second, trying to get

something good.

“Will likes to fuck people up,” Lucas warned them and took a sip.

“Why did you just drink?” Joana asked, confused.

Lucas made a confused expression. “Because I want to?”

Joana frowned.

“What? Are you going to be racist now?”

Joana got alarmed and started shaking her head frenetically. Lucas chuckled, triumphant, and took another sip. Mike rolled his eyes.

“I never been racist!” Will suddenly burst.

No one drunk. Everyone stared at him.

“Why did you ask that?” Lucas asked, baffled.

“I panicked,” Will admitted. “And now I’m going to take a sip from my drink, but not because I’ve been racist, but because I’m feeling awkward.” And he drunk a bit of his vodka with lemon juice.

“Lucas, your turn,” Max said.

Lucas stroked his chin, thinking. Eleven took the opportunity to lock eyes with Mike, who half-smiled at her. He looked bored. But he looked bored most of the time. It was his resting face.

“I never kissed a guy,” Lucas stated.

Will and all the girls drank.

Lucas looked at Mike and Dustin. “No? Never?”

Dustin shook his head.

Mike sighed. “Lucas, don’t be an ass.”

Lucas pretended to be offended.

“Anyways, my turn, right?” Mike said, sitting up straight. “I guess... I never-“

“Had sex,” Lucas finished.

Mike stared at him, upset.

“Dude, your time has passed. Shut up,” he said. Luca snorted into his cup. “I never burn something.”

He, Will and Dustin drank.

“What did you guys burn?” Max asked, surprised.

“My life,” Will said dramatically.

Eleven tried to control a giggle. Lucas laughed loudly and hit his best friend on the back, almost making him slip his drink.

“A box,” Mike confessed.

“Wood,” Dustin said.

“I actually burn a plastic bag with a couple of friends,” Will said and shrugged. “I don’t know why we did it. We were, like, ten.”

“Sounds fun,” Joana commented.

Lucas snickered at her remark.

“Anyways, Dustin, go,” Max said.

Dustin made a face.

“I’m terrible at this game, Max.”

“Just take the one I gave so nicely to Mike and he so unkindly refused,” Lucas said, looking sideways at Mike like the boy had insulted him.

“You’re an ass,” Mike commented and took a sip of his drink.

Everyone stared at Dustin, waiting for his I-never phrase.



Dustin blushed and muttered, "I guess I'll go with that, then. I never had sex."

Neither he nor Eleven drank.

"Ellie is a saint," Max praised, patting her best friend's head.

Eleven pushed her hand away. She noticed how Mike stared at her with a deep, serious look, and tried to ignore it.

"Don't worry, El, it's great," Lucas remarked. Eleven went red. "Girls love sex as much guys do. The first time might—"

"Why are you opining on girl's sex life?" Joana interrupted him. "I mean, you're a guy. What do you know?"

Will and Max laughed shamelessly at the shocked face Lucas made. Mike's lips moved upwards into a tense smile and Dustin took a sip of his drink.

"Yo-you—" Lucas raised a finger at Joana. "I like you."

Joana blinked, surprised, and looked away, trying not to smile at his comment.

"My turn!" Max said happily. "Okay, well, hum, I never... Wait, are we aiming to get really drunk, or to find out people's dirty secrets?"

Dirty secrets.

Eleven panicked.

"Really drunk," she said snappishly.

Everyone looked at her. Mike gave her a sympathetic look, understanding.

Max's mouth made an 'O' in surprise and then, she leaned over and hugged her best friend.

"Ohh, you're always full of surprises, Ellie. Okay, then," Max sat up straight, "I never kiss another person."

Everyone drank.

“If most of us had had sex, then the chances are all of us had already kissed someone,” Lucas said as a matter-of-fact.

“Didn’t you hear Ellie? Our goal is to get super drunk,” Max replied.

Lucas raised his hands, like asking for surrender.

“I apologize, jeez! I’m just saying, we can say things more interesting than obvious ones.”

“But obvious ones will get us drunk,” Joana replied.

Lucas smiled at her.

“I like you, Joana, but don’t push it, okay? Let’s be fun here.”

So, they did, each trying their best to be as imaginative as possible. Of course, Eleven always said obvious ones. And it got worse as she started to feel the alcohol effect in her body. Her vision was dizzy and the giggles came pouring out of her throat uncontrollably. Joana, like her, was a giggler. So, in most rounds, you’d find both girls giggling crazy at people’s expressions when they had to drink.

Mike was a quiet drunk person, but, if you paid attention, you would see how his eyes almost never left Eleven and her smiling face. Lucas was a talkative one, shouting most things instead of saying them at an acceptable tone of voice. Will was a flirter, yet he had no one to flirt with in that circle of people, so he started texting some of his booty calls.

Dustin and Max started to get closer and closer to each other, dropping arms around each other and kissing.

“This is not spin-the-bottle, jeez!” Lucas said after the two had kissed again. “If it is, please, dear Lord, El, switch places with me, so Joana and I can talk.” He intertwined his hands in a pray, looking at Eleven with puppy eyes.

Eleven laughed at him.

Joana gave him a flirtatious look. Lucas nudged Mike.

“She wants me,” he tried to whisper, but ended up saying too loud.

Joana giggled and drank the rest of her vodka.

Suddenly, a door opened. Everyone looked at the stairs, scared.

“Max, everything’s okay there?” Mrs. Winter’s voice echoed downstairs.

“Yees, Mom! We’re just playing a board game!” Max replied, her arm dangling over Dustin’s shoulders as she had been kissing him.

“Okay! Your dad and I are going to bed. Be good.”

“Okay. Night, Mom!”

“Night, Mrs. Winter!” The rest chanted.

Mrs. Winter laughed, said something they didn’t catch and closed the basement’s door again.

“Your mom is okay with us staying here while they go to bed?” Joana asked, surprised.

Max nodded with a big smile.

“They trust me because I’m the good girl and Billy’s the bad son, so... you know, I get some privileges,” Max explained, whirling her finger around for no apparent reason.

They continued the game.

It was almost midnight when Will stood up and said his ride had just arrived. Everyone, except Mike and Lucas, frowned at him, confused.

“Your mom is picking you up?” Dustin asked confused. He and Max had moved to the old sofa the Winters had on the basement and had been making out since then, while trying to keep a conversation with the rest of them. Of course, it hadn’t been working out very well.

“No,” Will muttered, embarrassed.

Lucas snickered. "It's one of his booty calls. Here," He stood up from his place next to Joana, stumbled a bit before finding balance, and said, "I'll take you to the door, my friend."

Will rolled his eyes.

"I'm not as drunk as you are, Lucas. And I know the guy."

Lucas made a movement with his arms like he was cutting the air.

"Doesn't matter. Still going. You," he pointed down at Joana with a smirk, "stay there, doll. I'll be right back." And he left the basement with Will behind him.

Max snorted from her place on the sofa.

"Jeez, Joana, who would have thought you'd hook up with one of my cousin's friends?"

Joana just blushed and played with her hair.

Eleven, who was still sitting in the same spot as she had during the game, looked over at Max with a silly smile. She was drunk, but not drunk enough to have lost her awareness of where she was. That was why she hadn't moved yet. If she moved, she knew she would end up getting closer to Mike, and, right now, for some reason, he was looking really, really, really, but really pretty. Eleven just wanted to kiss him all over the face.

Mike hadn't moved much too. Behind him, there was a random box, which had been placed there by Mr. Winter a few nights ago when he had been too lazy to put it over the other boxes; so, Mike just laid back on it.

"You know something, cousin Mike," Max suddenly said, leaving Dustin with his lips facing the air. She had a sneaky smile on her face and was looking at Eleven, "my bestie there used to think you were cute."

Eleven, who was deeply embarrassed, but also drunk, giggled at remark. Mike looked at her with a small smirk.

“Really?”

“Yup. But now she doesn’t, so, you know,-“ Max didn’t finish her sentence and started laughing.

“Pity,” Mike muttered, his eyes locked on Eleven’s. She felt warmth inside her stomach and shivers in her skin. Mike licked his lips. She looked down at her empty plastic cup.

Luckily, Max hadn’t heard that small comment.

Lucas came down the basement’s stairs and stopped right at its ends.

“Listen up, guys, since I’m one of the two-“ he raised two fingers –“most guest-guests here, I’m just going to come out and say this: Joana and I will sacrifice ourselves and sleep here in the basement. Really. It’s okay. Totally okay. Isn’t that right, Joana?” Lucas looked over at her.

Joana laughed.

“Who told you I want to sleep with you?”

“Hopefully, you.”

Joana pretended to think for a few moments. Then, she nodded her head.

“Pfft, alright, time to bed, then,” Max said and stood up. She lost her balance, but Dustin was there to catch her. She smiled at him. “Thanks, babe. Now, let’s go to bed, because I honestly do not want to see Lucas and Joana getting to know each other better.”

Lucas smirked.

Eleven stood up quietly and started picking up the empty plastic cups that were left on the floor. When she turned to Mike, he gave her his. She smiled softly.

“We have to put the trash outside,” Max said, looking around for the bottle of vodka and juice.

“Here,” Mike said, standing up. The bottles had been laying near him. He grabbed them and gave them to Max.

“Thanks, cousin.”

She and Eleven went to the street, to where the garbage containers were.

Before they went back, Max grabbed Eleven’s arm and hugged her.

“What is it, Max?” Eleven asked.

“Ellie, Ellie –“ Max pulled away and grabbed her face –“you’re the BEST best friend in the world, you know that, right?”

Eleven rolled her eyes.

“What do you want?”

“Can you sleep in Billy’s bed tonight?”

Eleven went wide-eyed.

“Are you crazy? I- No.”

“Pleaseeeeee, Ellie,” Max begged with puppy eyes. “Pretty pleaseee. Billy won’t come home until tomorrow. My mom and dad are going to sleep until late, so pleaseeee!”

“You’re going to have sex with Dustin with your parents sleeping two doors’ away from you?” Eleven asked, disgusted.

Max made a horrified expression.

“No, I’m not!” She exclaimed. “But, you know, have some fun... you know, we-“

“Okay, okay,” Eleven interrupted. She sighed. “Fine. I’ll sleep in Billy’s bedroom.”

Max hugged her tightly.

“I love you so much.”

“Love you too, Max.”

When they got inside the house, they found Mike climbing down the stairs.

“Where are you going, cou-siiin?” Max asked him, singing the last word.

“Water,” Mike muttered and went to the kitchen.

“Okaaaay,” Max sung again and turned to Eleven. “Let’s go?”

“I’ll go grab water too,” Eleven said. “For the hangover tomorrow.”

Max rolled her eyes.

“Pussies.”

She climbed the stairs quickly and silently.

Eleven entered the kitchen.

Mike was leaning against the counter with a half-full glass of water. He looked at her and smiled lazily. Eleven knew he was a bit drunk.

“I’m going to sleep in Billy’s tonight,” she told him, while opening the fridge’s door and looking for a bottle of water.

Mike chuckled.

“My cousin is going to have some fun tonight?”

Eleven shrugged and closed the fridge. She had a cold bottle of water in her hands.

“Guess so.”

Mike drank the rest of his water, put the glass in the sink and walked up to her.

“Well, then I guess, you can have some fun tonight too?” He wondered.

Eleven smiled and took one good look at Mike, from his bare feet to his dark hair. She felt a bit dizzy because of the drink, but not as much as a few hours ago. Now, she didn't want to giggle. She wanted Mike.

“Okay. That sounds good.”

Quietly, they went to Billy's bedroom and filled his bed with pillows as to look like someone was sleeping there. It was a long shot since Max could enter the bedroom and find out Eleven wasn't really there, but who knew? Maybe it could work. Nevertheless, it was just for precaution. Eleven put her alarm o'clock for nine am, so she could wake up before Max.

Mike locked his bedroom's door after Eleven came back from the bathroom. This was another precaution they decided to take: Mike could tomorrow easily say he had been so drunk he had accidentally locked his door without noticing.

“Can you give me some clothes?” Eleven asked, sitting on his bed. She was taking off her sneakers.

Mike nodded and went to his wardrobe.

Mike's bedroom used to be the guest-room. Since he began living there, one year and half ago, the room had become slowly his. There were posters of bands and films everywhere, some pictures of him with Lucas and Will, others of his sisters, and there was even one of his parents. It laid on top of a shelf over the desk. Every time Eleven saw that picture, her thought was always the same: His mother had been a beautiful woman.

“Here.” Mike gave her an old t-shirt and a pair of yellow shorts.

“Yellow?” Eleven said, surprised, accepting the clothes.

“I don't use them,” he replied. “My grandparents gave them to me a few years ago. My grandma had this obsession with me wearing yellow.” He shook his head.

Eleven giggled.



“I bet you look adorable in yellow.”

Mike shivered and pretended to be sick. Eleven laughed again. Then, she stood up and started undoing her trousers. Mike turned around.

“It’s okay, you know?” She said. “It’s like seeing me in a bikini or something.”

Mike looked over his shoulder.

“Are you giving me permission to watch you undress?”

Eleven blushed.

“I guess...?”

Mike made an impressed face. He turned around and, since he was already dressed for bed – on his underwear and wearing an old Indian Jones t-shirt -, he walked over to it and laid down on his back. He put his arms under his head and stared at Eleven with a small smile.

She rolled her eyes at him.

“You’re so funny,” she said sarcastically.

Eleven took off her trousers, threw them to the small armchair Mike had in the room, and put on the yellow shorts. Then, she looked down at her blouse and started unbuttoning it. But the buttons were small and sneaky.

“Damn it,” she murmured. “I’m not drunk, but I am too drunk for this.”

She turned to Mike with half of her blouse undone, pouting.

Mike’s lips curled in a smug smile.

“You can just pull it off without undoing the rest, you know,” he suggested.

“Really, Mike?”

He shrugged.

“Why not?”

Eleven ended up doing like he said, grabbing the end of her blouse and pulling it over her head. She was left in an old, white bra that had a small ribbon in the middle.

Mike nodded. “Yup, just like a bikini,” he remarked, making a reference to her light pink bikini that also had a ribbon.

Eleven shook her head, grabbed the t-shirt he had given her and put it on. Finally, she managed to take her bra off under it.

Mike looked at her, enthralled.

“I always wonder how you girls do that.”

“We’re amazing,” Eleven replied as she placed her knees on the bed and then went on all fours. She crawled her way to where Mike was and, to his surprise, sat up instead of lying down.

They stared at each other in silence.

“Who was she?” Eleven finally asked.

Mike blinked.

“Who?”

“The girl you slept with,” she explained. “Or, you know, girls...”

Mike snorted and turned to his side, laying his head on top of one of his arms. He stretched the other one and touched Eleven’s knee.

“You really want to know that shit?”

Eleven nodded.

If she was entirely sober, she wouldn’t have the guts to admit that; that she wanted to know about the other girls that had made Mike’s heart beat fast, that had him dreaming about them, kissing them...

“Well, it was with my first and only girlfriend,” Mike suddenly confessed, his hand moving to meet Eleven’s over her lap. “I was sixteen. We had known each other for a while since we were classmates and used to do group works together. Anyways, we dated for, what, six months? Slept with each other four months into our relationship... Broke two months later because we just stopped liking each other in that way. We remained classmates. It was all cool.”

Eleven stared at Mike, feeling his fingers playing with hers in a kind way, almost as to show her that he was here now with her and with no one else.

Did she know that? That he was only with her and no one else?

“Have you been with anyone else since you moved here?”

Mike blinked.

“What do you mean?”

“Like, made out or hook up or-“

“I kissed a girl at a party that Lucas and Will took me. But that was... *waaaay* before I thought I could actually kiss *you*.”

Eleven looked at him and saw the honesty in his eyes. She then grabbed firmly the hand that had been playing with hers and laid down on her side, facing him, their bodies close to each other.

“Is it that good?”

“What?”

“Sex.”

Mike pressed his lips together, thinking.

“Well, I guess it is.”

“You guess?”

Mike shrugged one shoulder.

“With my ex, it was alright. We had fun, but... no big deal.”

Eleven nodded. Her curious mind wasn't satisfied yet. She had never thought about actually having sex with somebody until.... well, until Mike, if she was being honest. Max had had sex with Troy during the months they been together. She had said it was fun too. Eleven remembered how she had thought about Mike back then, wondered if he too had had sex with someone. Now she knew he had.

“No one makes good advertisement of sex,” she said out loud. “Max said it was fine too.”

Mike chuckled.

“Well, we don't want to spoil anything, I guess.”

Eleven hit his shoulder playful before dropping her arm over his body, pulling herself closer to him. She felt Mike's arm circling her waist. His hand laid wide-opened against her back. It was warm.

“Maybe someday I'll find out if it is good or not,” Eleven said, looking Mike in the eyes.

Mike smiled softly.

“Hope to be there to see you find out,” he said cheekily.

Eleven tried not to laugh at this teasing remark and kissed him.

Maybe it was the booze still running in her veins, maybe it was the talk they just had, but Eleven felt confident enough to pull Mike into a more passionate kiss, her tongue making way into his mouth.

She heard Mike's breathing loudly and his hand, the one on her back, gripping the t-shirt she was wearing.

Eleven dropped a leg over Mike's waist and pulled her body onto his. Mike pulled away, his lips still teasingly close, and then he moved his head and started kissing her down the neck.

Eleven let her eyes closed, enjoying the sensation of Mike's warm and soft lips against her skin.

She moved one of her hands down over Mike's back until deciding to change its course over his stomach. Then, her hand went up and stopped in his chest, right over his heart.

Eleven opened her eyes.

His heart was beating fast. Really fast.

Mike's lips left her neck and he moved up. Eleven felt his warm breath against her ear.

"It always beats like that."

Eleven blinked. She dug her fingers into Mike's chest, still feeling the quick beat of his heart.

"W-what?" She let out.

"When you are around," Mike explained, "my heart just goes crazy."

*"I never got to ask: did you like the book I gave you?" Eleven questioned Mike one lazy Saturday afternoon that they managed to get together.*

*Max had gone out with Dustin again, both very invested in spending time together. Weirdly enough, they hadn't started dating.*

*Mike nodded and hugged her by the waist, pulling her closer. He kissed her cheek.*

*"Thank you. It's really fascinating."*

*Eleven smiled happily and laid her head against his.*

"Did you lend that book you bought about Ancient Greece to my cousin?"

Eleven, who had been laying on Max's bed alone reading a magazine, while her best friend went downstairs to get something for them to eat, raised her head, surprised with that question.

"Why do you ask that?"

"I just saw the book you bought in his hands," Max said and laid two

bags of Cheetos on the bed.

"Yeah, I lent it to him," Eleven muttered.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Then, why did he say it was his?"

Eleven blinked.

Max crossed her arms and stared at her best friend with mistrust eyes. Actually, she looked mad. Really mad.

Eleven sat up on the bed.

"I-"

"You gave him the book, didn't you?"

"Max-"

"Ellie, come on," Max sighed and sat down on the bed. She looked at her best friend, hurt. "Did you or did you not give my cousin that stupid book about Ancient Greece?"

Eleven gulped and nodded.

"Why?" Max asked, confused.

"He likes history," Eleven remarked weakly.

Max frowned, still very confused. Suddenly, she blinked and something in her eyes changed, like she had understood something.

"And you still like him."

Eleven closed her eyes.

"Max..."

"No, you do! And you can't, Ellie!" Max exclaimed, upset.

“Why not?!” Eleven asked, rising her voice.

Max stared at her wide-eyed.

“Ellie-“

“He likes me, Max! And, if you had let me talk back in August, you would know the all thing!”

Max blinked.

“W-what?”

“You never let me finish the first time I told you about my crush on your cousin, Max,” Eleven complained. “You never got to know that, when we went to the lake and he and I took a walk, he kissed me. You never got to know that we fooled around for months, then I ignored him for some stupid reason, but he came after me. Max,” Eleven had tears in her eyes, “he came after me. And now? Now I’m trying. I’m trying so hard to make him happy again, Max. And I think I’m doing it right... I think he’s learning how to be happy again. Because of me.”

Her best friend stared at her with a very hard-to-read expression.

“You... you guys are together?”

Eleven bit her bottom lip.

“We- We are seeing each other.”

“And you didn’t tell me.”

Eleven suddenly saw hurt again in Max’s eyes.

“Max...”

“I’m your best friend. I’ve been that for ten years!” She exclaimed, brusquely standing up.

Eleven closed her eyes, suddenly feeling a big desire to cry.

They were fighting.

Max and Eleven never fought.

“I know, but you said- in August you said-“

“Doesn’t matter what I said in August of last year, El! It’s June now! It has been a year since-since...” Max shut herself up. Her lips curled up and down, almost trying to stop her from saying something. From feeling something. “You had so many opportunities to tell me again.”

“You wouldn’t listen.”

“How do you know that?!” Max almost shouted. Eleven closed her eyes and whimpered. “You never tried, Eleven!”

She called her Eleven. Max almost never called her Eleven...

Max suddenly chuckled sadly, shaking her head and keeping her eyes away from Eleven. She had tears in her eyes, but she wouldn’t let them fall. Max didn’t cry.

“Max, come on,” Eleven begged.

Max pressed her lips together, not looking at her best friend. Her hands started to shake and she crossed her arms, trapping her hands under her armpits.

“Are we-“ Eleven gulped –“Are we fighting because of a boy?”

Max finally looked at her. She sniffled.

“I guess we are.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I got inspired! I don't know what happened. Instead of one, I'm actually going to write three chapters of this story.

Thank you so much for reading. I'd really like if you gave me some sort of feedback.

I hope to get inspired again and write the third part of this story quickly.



### 3. Chapter 3

*“You guys fought because of me?” Mike asked, agape.*

*Eleven, with tears in her eyes, nodded.*

*“W-why?”*

*“She is hurt,” Eleven answered, and felt a sob in her throat, “b-because I-I d-didn’t-“ She closed her eyes and finally sobbed. “I didn’t... I didn’t tell her... sooner.”*

*Mike stared at her without knowing what to say. In the end, he hugged her and let her cry on his shoulder.*

*“I’m spending way too much time with you, Eleven,” Jennifer Hayes stated one July afternoon in which they had gone out to eat ice-cream.*

*Eleven looked at her sadly.*

*“And then you have those puppy eyes, honestly!” Jennifer remarked.*

*Eleven looked down at her half-eaten ice-cream.*

*“Max’s still mad at me,” Eleven reminded her.*

*“I know,” Jennifer said. “That’s why we are still hanging out too much.”*

*Eleven cracked a sad smile.*

*“And I barely see Mike too,” she said.*

*Since Max and she had a fight, Eleven had not gone back to the Winter’s house. And, since their fight had been over Mike, Max was pissed at her cousin too. But not as much as she was at Eleven. Because Eleven was her best friend. Or had been.*

*“That’s just sad. I mean, you fought with Max because of him and now you guys-“*

“We’re okay,” Eleven explained. “We just... I don’t go there and I’m afraid to call him because-“ She sighed –“he still is the reason why Max and I fought, so... it’s kind of- I don’t know how to explain it.”

Jennifer frowned a bit, confused, but then nodded, understanding.

“I get it.”

Around five pm, they returned home. Jennifer waved at her from her front yard and Eleven managed to smile back.

Terry Ives was already home, talking on the phone with someone while cleaning up the hall’s mirror. She smiled at her daughter and pulled her to quick hug before answering the person, “I guess we can go there on the 29<sup>th</sup>. I’ll just ask for early vacation.”

Eleven stopped at the end of the stairs and turned to her mother, confused. Who was she talking to?

“No, Becky, come on.”

Becky was Eleven’s aunt. She was younger than her mother and lived in Michigan, born and raised there. Terry Ives had been the one of the two Ives’ sisters to leave their hometown. She had moved to Hawkins after meeting Eleven’s father. Ironically enough, he had left after finding out about Terry’s pregnancy.

“We either go there or you come here, Becky,” Terry said. “Why? It’s your birthday, for God’s sakes! We already missed it last year because the coffee shop was a mess, but this year-“ Terry Ives went quiet as her sister most likely started to talk.

Eleven went upstairs to her bedroom. She dropped her small, brown purse over her desk and went to lie on her bed.

Her bedroom was a small division painted light pink (light pink had always been Eleven’s favourite colour) with a bed leaned back against the wall on the left. At its feet, there was a large, square window with yellow curtains over it. Eleven had an old desk on the right side of the bedroom, next to her wooden wardrobe.

On the wall that faced the door, there was a bookshelf filled with

books and framed pictures – most of them were of Eleven and Max, or Eleven and her mother. By its side, there was a round mirror with stickers on it.

Looking over at the pictures, Eleven was suddenly reminded of the one that Mike had given her as a late birthday gift. Or had it been a sorry gift?

She moved her body to the right and leaned towards her night table. She opened the third drawer and took out the picture. It was her and Mike on the lake. She was smiling at the camera while Mike had been caught looking at her.

Eleven was sixteen years old and eight months, and she wasn't sure if she knew what love was. Her mother had first fallen in love when she was twenty-two and got her heart broken when she was twenty-four. Her aunt Becky had never fallen in love and didn't want to. Max had thought she was falling for Dustin, but kept it hidden for too long that now anyone could see how confused she was about it. Will had once told Eleven that he had yet loved someone, but could see himself falling for someone if the right person showed up. Lucas was just an ass who laughed at emotions.

And Eleven... Eleven didn't know. She didn't know if this thing she felt, this sudden calm whenever Mike was around, excluding the moments he would do something to make her heart beat crazily; this desire to be near him that was slowly becoming a need; or this... this daydreaming that had become a *What would Mike think of...?*, was a part of falling, or if it was already love.

She missed him now that she barely got to see him. Often, she would be doing something totally normal, like watching TV, reading a book or just walking down the street, when she suddenly would smell it. Mike's scent. His sour, yet nice perfume. And she would look around, trying to find him, but he wasn't there. It was just her brain remembering him, missing him.

Eleven laid the photo of her and Mike on her chest and sighed.

What was she going to do?

*"Do you still want to see me?" Mike asked her.*

*It was Friday night. Her mother was out with her friends and Mike had shown up unannounced at her door.*

*"Of course I do," Eleven replied, almost offended with the question.*

*Mike looked at her over his shoulder. He had entered the house and stopped in the middle of the hall.*

*"Then, why are you ignoring me? That wasn't... That wasn't the deal, El."*

*"It's because of Max, and you know it," Eleven said sadly and closed the door behind her.*

*Mike turned around to finally face her. Eleven walked up to him and wrapped her arms around his torso. He hugged her back and kissed her forehead.*

*"I'm sad," she said out loud.*

*"I can see that," Mike remarked. "I can see Max is sad too."*

*Eleven pulled back with a sigh and walked to the living-room, taking Mike with her by the hand.*

*"What have I missed in her life?"*

*Mike scratched his head.*

*"Well, she and Dustin started dating."*

*Eleven groaned and dropped on the sofa. Mike sat down next to her.*

*"I can't believe it!"*

*"Yeah, Aunt Mandy can't either." Eleven's eyes went wide-opened. "Max has already introduced him to her parents."*

*"A-are you serious?"*

*Mike nodded.*

“Well, yeah. They already knew who he was, so, it was just basically saying that he was her boyfriend now.”

Eleven laid her head on Mike’s shoulder and sighed.

“How mad is she at you?”

“Well, I don’t know. We never were ones to talk to each other,” Mike replied, wrapping an arm around Eleven’s shoulders, his hand went to her head and stroked her hair gently. “Sometimes she gives me this look, like, she is mad, but then... I don’t know. It’s weird.”

Eleven tilted her head to look up at Mike.

His eyes, which used to only know apathy or sadness, had now a flicker of worry in them; had a light in them that hadn’t been there before. His soft and warm lips, which sometimes drove Eleven crazy, were pressed together into a thin line as he thought in what to say next. His straight, dark hair, which sometimes he would forget to brush and made him look like a crazy man, had a small strand curling up in the middle of his forehead. Eleven raised her hand and straightened it down.

Mike glanced down at her.

“I thought you were ignoring me,” he said in a gloomy tone of voice.

Eleven raised her head to look at him straight in the eyes.

“I’m ignoring Max’s house,” she corrected him. “And... well, I’m scared to call you in case she sees I’m calling, because then she might get angrier and-” Eleven felt tears in her eyes. She was so tired of crying in the last month. “I just want my best friend back, Mike. And I don’t want to lose you.”

“Do you think you’ll have to?” Mike asked.

Eleven frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“To get my cousin’s friendship back, do you think... you’ll have to

lose me?”

Eleven's frown deepened.

“W-what? That... That wasn't what I meant.”

Mike grabbed her hand.

“I know that. I'm just... wondering. Because, if you have to, if that what it takes to get you and Max to be friends again, then-“

“Don't be ridiculous!” Eleven interrupted him. “Don't you dare to be that ridiculous, Mike! You know Max. You know she wouldn't ask that of me.”

“Maybe you'll be the one to decide that,” Mike replied, glancing away. “If you don't stop feeling guilty when you're with me, then-“

Eleven let go of Mike's hand and grabbed his face, making him look at her.

“Don't.”

“I know how guilt works, El.”

“And I know how I feel about you, Mike,” she said harshly.

He blinked. His lips curled into a surprised smile.

“And how do you feel about me, El?”

“Like you don't know,” she replied and let go of his face.

“We never really talk about that, do we?” Mike wondered.

Eleven glanced at him, nervous, and shook her head.

Guess they didn't.

Suddenly, they heard a laugh. The bunch of keys that Terry Ives owned tinkled together as she opened the front door.

Eleven stood up quickly, with a panicking look on her face. Mike

intertwined his hands together over his knees and lowered his head, feeling edgy.

“Oh, no, Becky, honestly, it will be fun. Really, you don’t have to worry about us. I mean, Jane wil-“ Terry Ives stopped talking, her phone hanging by her ear. She stared at her daughter and then at the boy sitting on her sofa. She frowned. “Becky, I gotta go.”

“Mama, this is Mike,” Eleven introduced after her mother hung up. She sent Mike a quick look, asking for help.

Mike nodded weakly and stood up nervously. He turned to Eleven’s mother.

“Good night, Mrs. Ives.”

“G-good night,” Terry said, confused, her phone still in her hand. “I don’t think we’ve met before?”

“He is Max’s cousin, Mama.” Eleven approached her. “You must have seen him before.”

Terry Ives took a good look at Max’s cousin. He looked nervous, licking his lips and glancing away from her. He had a nice face, she thought, nice enough for Eleven to like.

Terry looked at her daughter, who had a guilty expression in her face. She was hiding something, clearly. The boy was just not Max’s cousin, or a casual friend of hers. He was much more than that.

But Terry wouldn’t embarrass her daughter right now. So, she put on a kind smile and said, “Would you like a cup of tea, Mike?”

Mike blinked, surprised.

“Hum, I-“ He looked over at Eleven, who did not know what to say or do. “I guess?”

Terry nodded, still with a smile on her face, and said, “Then, let’s move this party to the kitchen, shall we?”

*“He’s cute,” Terry said to her daughter over breakfast.*

*Eleven blushed.*

*“Mama...”*

*“What? For you, he is, isn’t he? And he seemed like a really nice boy, very polite, very... quiet too. Anyways, going to Max’s house must be double fun now, no?” She joked, unaware of what was happening between Eleven and her best friend.*

“I honestly thought the last Star Wars film wasn’t that bad,” Dustin remarked while taking a Cheeto from the bag. Max was sitting next to him on the grass, sunbathing, and in front of them sat Lucas and Mike. “I mean, they dedicated it to Carrie Fisher.”

Lucas shrugged and held his hand out. Dustin passed him the Cheetos’ bag.

“I guess I was expecting more,” Lucas said. “Anyways, my favourite will always be A New Hope. Right, Mike?”

Mike, who had been staring at his cousin, tilted his head to the right and made a face.

“I guess.”

“You guess?” Lucas said, passing the chips’ bag over to Mike.

“I don’t have any favourites. I can name you the one I like the least, but that’s it,” Mike replied, putting a Cheeto in his mouth.

“I bet I’m the person you like the least here,” Max suddenly observed. She sat up and took off her sunglasses, pushing them onto her red hair. “Isn’t that right?”

Mike stared at her for a few seconds. His cousin was trying to put on a strong façade, but Mike, having lived with her for almost two years, knew a bit about her. She was just putting on a show to cover up her hurt.

“No. It’s actually Lucas,” Mike replied in a serious tone.

“Hey!”



Dustin chuckled and Max's lips curled into a half-smile.

Mike felt his phone vibrating in his jeans. He took it out, saw it was Eleven that had texted him and opened the message. *I'm ready if you want to come and pick me up.*

Mike coughed.

"Lucas, Will's ready. Let's go?"

Lucas nodded, very aware that Will was spending the day in the beach with his family, and stood up. They said their goodbyes to Max and Dustin, passing the Cheetos' bag to the boy, and got into the house through the kitchen's door. Mike went to the living-room and grabbed Billy's car keys. His cousin was sleeping upstairs.

"All this talking-in-code shit is going to go wrong someday," Lucas said as he opened the door for them to leave.

"Lucas, if you want a ride home, shut up," Mike replied and crossed the door.

"Aye, aye, captain," Lucas muttered and followed him.

Mike had not expected Eleven in his life. When his older sister had come to him after his parents' death and said he was moving in with his uncles and cousins in Hawkins, he had not expected Eleven to be part of that package as well.

She smiled so much and she wasn't even aware of how she smiled, or how her smile made others want to smile.

He suddenly remembered how stupid he had thought he was after having asked her about her nickname. That was the moment that, if someone asshole enough asked him to go back and change in order to never fall for Eleven, he would have to choose. Because he had opened a door then for something he hadn't been quite ready yet. Sometimes he wondered if he still was. If he actually deserved Eleven and all the attention she gave him.

Shit, she had given him a book. About Ancient Greece. And only if she knew how much he cherished that damn book...

Or anything she did for him, really. Even that promise of hers.

*I'll make you happy and not guilty about it.*

Mike could still see her face in his mind when she said those words to him. How scared and vulnerable she had been, exposing her feelings like that to him, to a guy that barely knew how to feel himself. But she had had the guts to do it.

Eleven, she was-

"You really like her, don't you?" Lucas' voice woke him up from his thoughts.

They were almost at Lucas' house. Mike had stopped at a STOP sign and his friend decided to talk for the first time since they got in the car.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Just looks like you do," Lucas replied.

Mike licked his lips.

It wasn't only like. Not anymore. It started out like that, yes, but, as months went by and he got to know Eleven, he felt himself falling. He felt himself wanting something that made him guilty.

"I don't just like her," Mike confessed.

Lucas nodded, his eyes on the passing streets.

"But you're scared of that, aren't you? Because of all the guilt shit you feel," he observed, glancing over at his friend. Mike didn't say anything. "Man, I just... Honestly? You're a lucky ass and you should know that and be happy about that."

"I am?" Mike managed to half-smile.

"Yeah, man," Lucas said.

Mike parked in front of the Sinclair's house. Lucas got out of the car,

closed the door and then leaned down, so Mike could see his face through the opened window.

“If you keep acting like you don’t deserve her, then you’ll end up not deserving her for real, Mike,” Lucas said with no trace of humour in his face.

Mike nodded, understanding where his friend was getting to.

“Thanks, man.”

“At your service.” Lucas patted the car’s ceiling and stepped away from it. “Have fun today.”

Mike chuckled weakly.

“I will.”

Eleven was waiting for him at her doorstep. She was leaning against the door, arms crossed in front of her pretty, pink dress that went over her knees, and was biting a fingernail.

When she saw Billy’s car, she grabbed her purse from the ground and almost ran to it. She sat in, put her seatbelt on and looked over at Mike with a smile.

“Where are we going?”

Mike shrugged.

“Films?”

“Sounds good.”

They were quiet for a while. Mike noticed from the corner of his eye how Eleven was biting her bottom lip, and her fingers were playing with the fabric of her dress. She was nervous to ask him something.

“You can ask, you know,” he said.

Eleven blushed.

“How’s Max?” She asked in a tiny voice.

“With Dustin, so as happy as she can be, I guess,” Mike answered.

Eleven nodded.

“Thank you.”

Mike flashed her a small smile.

He couldn't explain how it was like to be around Eleven. At first, it had been a sort of painful experience because part of him wanted to try something, wanted to see if she liked him back, and then another part refused, shouted at him, and gave him nightmares. Nightmares about his parents. It judged him because he couldn't love. Not when his parents hadn't got the chance to do that.

Yet, as he let Eleven in and told her all how about his fucked-up mind, something changed. For as many times his heart beat fast for seeing her, it remained calm, almost at peace because *she was there*, she was smiling at him, kissing him and talking to him. For every time he felt nervous to ask, or confess something to her, there were others when the words just rolled out of his tongue like it was the easiest thing in the world. Because it was Eleven.

Eleven.

Eleventh month, eleventh day.

He would never forget that date.

“You're quiet. I mean, quieter than usual,” Eleven suddenly observed. She was glancing at him with a worried look. “Is everything okay, Mike?”

He nodded and managed to give her a small smile.

“Yes. I'm just thinking.”

“About what?”

“You.”

He didn't have to look to know she was flushing, looking red like a

tomato, feeling warm like a summer afternoon, but with a smile. A sweet smile on her face.

Their trip to the cinema theatre took over thirty minutes. They left Hawkins behind a while ago since they still didn't comfortable to hang out in public there, especially when Max was mad at Eleven.

When they were almost arriving at their destination, Mike explained to Eleven that he had seen an ad for an 80's films session that would start around three pm. He asked her if she was up to it. If not, they could go somewhere and check whatever it was showing.

"Oh, I haven't seen many from that decade, so –" She shrugged – "Why not?"

Mike smiled at her.

"It will be fun, I promise. I saw the films they were screening and I think you'll like them. I mean, everyone likes *The Breakfast club* and–"

"Mike," she interrupted him. He went quiet. She smiled, having noticed how nervous he was. "You don't have to try and sell out the idea. I'm fine with an 80's films session."

Mike cleared his throat.

"Cool."

"Cool," she repeated, with a tiny smile on her face.

Mike glanced at her before turning left on the intersection. At the end of the street, you could see the main front of the cinema theatre.

They passed through a long line of people and Mike sighed. He hoped to get seats for them. It would be rather disappointing to bring Eleven here for nothing. And he really wanted her to see *The Breakfast Club* and *The Goonies*. They were two of his favourite films from the 80s.

Mike parked the car in the parking lot behind the cinema theatre.

They joined the waiting line and Mike looked nervously at the people

in front of them. Eleven noticed how he tall he was compared to most of the guys there. And some were much older than him.

Suddenly, she wondered if he was going to get any taller. She hoped he didn't. Eleven was stuck at this medium-height for the rest of her life, and she already felt short when standing next to Mike.

Mike suddenly sighed.

"We'll get seats," Eleven assured, grabbing his hand and intertwining their fingers together.

Mike looked down at her. The frown between his eyebrows disappeared and he leaned down to kiss her forehead.

"I hope so," he muttered.

Eleven noticed he looked sad with the idea of not going to see the film session. So, she went on her tiptoes to reach his lips. They kissed softly for a few seconds. Then, she pulled back and leaned her body against his. He wrapped an arm around her.

They waited for over half an hour, but finally managed to get in. They spent the afternoon there, watching three films in a row, and then Mike took her to a burger place for dinner. They paid for their meals separately. No gentleman shit.

*"Where were you all day yesterday?" Max asked the next morning over breakfast.*

*Mike looked over his cereals at her. Billy was eating French toasts and watching the two with an amusing expression.*

*"Why do you ask that?"*

*"You came home late," Max replied, almost judging.*

*"I went to the films. There was an 80s films session in the next town."*

*"I didn't know Lucas and Will were fans of 80s films," Max pestered in an unfriendly voice.*

*Mike licked his lips, trying to control himself. But, in the end, it didn't matter.*

*"They aren't. I didn't go with them."*

"I saw her on the street and she just stared at me li-like, like I was..."

Eleven closed her eyes. Mike put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer. Eleven hid her face against his chest and took a deep breath, taking in his scent.

"It's rude," she muttered.

Mike chuckled softly.

"Yeah, it is."

"I can't deal with this anymore," Eleven murmured and raised her head. "I'm going on vacations in three days. I've literally spent more than a month without talking to Max. Do you know when was the last time that happened?"

"No," Mike answered sincerely.

"Never!"

Eleven sat up on her bed and pulled her legs closer to her body. She hugged her knees and laid her chin on them.

Mike looked at her back, noticing how her curly hair went over her shoulders. It had grown a lot since they first met.

"She's being so rude," Eleven muttered.

Mike sighed and sat up. He wrapped his arms around her. Then, he leaned in and kissed her cheek twice.

"It's going to be okay," he said.

"How do you know?" Eleven asked without looking at him.

Mike kissed the corner of her lips. He felt them curl into what could be a smile.

“I don’t, but... I hope.”

Eleven glanced at him and stared for a few seconds, taking in his serious expression, his devotion to make her feel better. In the end, she nodded.

“Anyways...” Mike suddenly pulled back and slid his way out of the bed. Eleven looked at him with a frown, watching him walk to his jacket. She had wondered why he had brought a jacket. It was hot outside. “I’ve got something to show you,” he stated.

Eleven raised herself into a straighter sitting position. Mike came back with something white in his hands. He gave it to her.

It was a letter. From University of Indiana. It hadn’t been opened yet.

Eleven looked at Mike.

“Why haven’t you opened it?” She asked.

Mike sat down in front of her. He placed a hand on her naked leg and stroked it nervously.

“I wanted you to open,” he revealed.

Eleven blinked.

“W-why?”

“Because whether they are good or bad news, I want to hear it from you.”

Eleven’s heart skipped beat as her lips curled into a devoted smile. She turned to the letter and opened it carefully.

Mike gulped, watching her take out the piece of paper from the envelope. Eleven unfolded it and read it quietly.

Finally, she looked up at him with no reaction. Mike licked his lips, nervous.

“So?” He asked.



Eleven suddenly moved, going up on her knees and then shortening the distance between them. She hugged him firmly.

Mike sighed sadly. He hadn't got in.

"You got in," she said into his ear. Her arms embraced him even more tightly. "You got in, Mike!"

Mike didn't know how to react at first.

He had done it. He had got into the university he wanted, into the course he wanted. He was going to study History. He was going to live with his sister.

Mike closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He wrapped his arms around Eleven, finally hugging her back.

"Are you happy?" She asked him.

Mike just nodded, hiding his face against her shoulder.

Yeah, he was happy.

*"Are you going to call me?" Eleven asked him on her last day in Hawkins before going to her aunt's house in Michigan for one-week vacation. When she returned, Mike wouldn't be in town anymore, but in Ohio with his sisters.*

*Mike leaned in and kissed her softly. "Promise I will."*

"I don't think they would get it."

Mike looked over at his older sister, who was sitting on the other side of the sofa. She had her laptop on her lap and was searching for something to show him.

Nancy Wheeler had grown up too fast and too forcibly in the last two years, upon taking all their parents' problems and obligations on her shoulders. She was a petit woman, with brown wavy hair and blue eyes. She used to be the girl that broke too many hearts during high school. The girl who went to college with straight A's. The girl who had many dreams and was sure she would achieve them all. Now,

now she was no longer a girl. She was a woman. The woman who took care of her two siblings because she had lost her parents.

“About you and...” Mike didn’t finish the sentence.

Nancy nodded.

When Nancy first started college, she met a boy named Steve Harrington and they fell crazily in love with each other. On her second year of college, she met Jonathan Byers, who, yes, was Will’s older brother. She had felt something strange back then because she loved Steve deeply, but she wanted to love Jonathan as well.

There had been a mess of a story going on for a while, and then, Karen and Ted Wheeler died in a car crash.

Nancy forgot all about boys, having at that time other kind of responsibilities: her two siblings. She had to learn how to be a sister, a mother and a father to her younger sister, Holly, and she had to become a loyal partner for her brother Mike. She had no time for love triangles.

But shortly after their parents’ death, Steve and Jonathan started coming around her small flat. They didn’t ask for anything, as she had first thought they would, just offered; offered to do anything to make her life easier. Promised her to just be there for her, no drama, no fights, no love triangles. Nancy found herself becoming dependent on both of the guys.

Last Christmas, she confessed to Mike to be dating both. When he remarked that she shouldn’t play with people’s emotions, Nancy interrupted him and said: *No, Mike, I’m in a three-way relationship. They are both in love with each other too.*

“I mean, how can I introduce to our old-fashioned and Catholic grandparents my two boyfriends? They’ll ask a million questions.”

“I asked a million questions,” Mike reminded her.

Nancy gave him a look.

“No, you asked a hundred questions.”

Mike snorted.

“Anyways, here,” Nancy scooted over to her brother and showed him her laptop’s screen, “I found these two flats: one has three bedrooms, the other four. They are basically the same price. I cannot afford either alone.”

“Aren’t Steve and Jonathan thinking about moving in with you?”

Nancy glared at him.

“Too early for that?” Mike wondered.

His sister nodded.

“I can start working while I study,” he said.

Nancy sighed.

“I guess you’ll have to... Either way, you can only afford to work a part-time job. For both flats, the landlords are asking a ridiculous amount of money and-“

“How about Lucas?” Mike suddenly remembered. “He got in University of Indiana too. He’s going to study Law. He’ll need a place to live.”

Nancy pressed her lips together and considered the idea.

“Will got in New York, didn’t he?”

Mike nodded.

“Yeah, Fine Arts.”

“Jonathan’s really proud of him.”

Mike first started hanging out with Will Byers after knowing he was Jonathan’s younger brother. He had known Will as one of his quiet and nice classmates, who always hung out with the loud dark-skinned athletic guy, and that had been it. Then, after one night, during Christmas holidays, in which Jonathan told him about his young

brother who lived in Hawkins, Mike decided to give Will a shot, believing the boy could be as good of a person as his older brother. And he was indeed. With Will, Lucas came. Mike was good with both.

“Yeah, I can imagine he is. We all are.”

Nancy smiled softly at her brother and put her away her laptop.

“So, you can talk to Lucas about living with us and Holly?”

Since Nancy had finally graduated and got a real job as a journalist in local newspaper, their grandparents were allowing their eleven-year-old sister to come live with them in September. Nancy was taking care of all the papers that came with transferring Holly from a school in Ohio to Indiana.

“Yeah, I can do that. I’m sure he’ll accept. I mean, he does know me, and you two are my sisters, so...” Mike shrugged. “He’ll take it.”

Nancy sighed, a bit more relived, and laid her head on her brother’s shoulder.

“And you, you’ve been good?”

Nancy had lost count of the times she had spent convincing her younger brother into *actually living*, and not just surviving through life. She had also lost count of the nights she spent awake, wondering if he was doing okay in Hawkins with their aunt Mandy and her family, especially after he had told her all about their parents’ divorce. The one that did not happen because they had died too soon.

“Yeah, I am... I mean, I have to, don’t I? At this point...”

Nancy raised her head to look at him.

“You better be. Because I honestly do not know what else to say to you at this point,” she warned him with a serious expression.

Then, they shared a chuckle.

“And the girl?” Nancy finally asked. Mike knew that question was bound to come sooner or later. “Eleven, isn’t it?”

Mike tried to control a smile upon hearing Eleven's name. Her face popped up in his mind, and for a second he got lost in the reminds of her smile and laughter.

Eleven had a cute laughter.

"She's good. She... Well, she and Max had a fight, but –" Mike nodded a bit – "They are working it out."

Even if he had to make sure they were.

*"It is not a boy," Terry Ives said with a frown. "At least, I think not. I mean, yes, there is one, but–"*

*Becky touched her sister's arm.*

*"Let me be the judge of that, okay, big sis?"*

"You know, the thing about mothers is that they don't actually have a clue about what's going on in their kids' lives," Aunt Becky told Eleven as she sat down next to her in one of the garden chairs. Eleven had been drinking a lemonade and sunbathing while her mother and aunt had been inside the house cleaning the kitchen. They never wanted her to help, always telling her to go and enjoy summer while she was young.

Eleven looked up from where she had been gazing off and raised her eyebrow, confused.

"Why do you say that?" She looked behind her shoulder at the kitchen's window. "Where's my mom?"

"She's out shopping. She wants to bake a cake for tonight's dessert." Becky rolled her eyes. "Even on vacation, she bakes. Unbelievable."

Eleven chuckled.

"Anyways, your mother and I have been discussing something about you," Aunt Becky told her.

Eleven blinked, surprised. Then, she got scared.

“W-what?”

“Where are your long talks on the phone with Max?”

Eleven’s reaction was actually painful to watch. The girl lowered her head and her eyes turned into two brown pools of complete sadness. She sighed, suddenly reminded that she had left a best friend back in Hawkins who still did not talk to her. She missed Max terribly.

“She’s mad at me.”

“Why?”

Eleven sighed.

“A boy...”

*I knew it.*

Becky leaned over to grab her niece’s hand.

“What boy?”

“Her cousin.”

Becky frowned.

“That’s a bit incestuous.”

Eleven raised her head, surprised.

“What? No! That’s- That’s not the problem, Aunt Becky. Jesus!”

Becky let out a breath in relief.

“Oh, thank God. I was scared for a moment.”

“Jesus, how could you think that?” Eleven asked, feeling disgusted with the idea of Max and Mike, who were cousins, together.

“Well, you didn’t give me many details, did you now?”

Eleven didn’t answer.

“How about you tell me the all story, so I can help you out?”

“You can’t,” Eleven replied. Her aunt raised an eyebrow. “Help me out, I mean.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

Eleven sighed and told her the all story, starting from the beginning. And, for Eleven, the beginning was when Max had introduced her cousin to her in that cold November afternoon in 2016 after they had got to her house to do their homework together.

Eleven told her aunt about all the months she spent crushing on Mike, thinking it was just an illusion, a stupid daydream that she shouldn’t be having because he was Max’s cousin, and all the mixed signals he gave her were too confusing and could actually hurt her in the end. But then, the kiss in the forest came, and Eleven’s aunt interrupted her there to ask her how it had been. Eleven blushed and said *fine*, it was *fine*. It had been incredible.

Then, she described Max’s reaction upon hearing of Eleven’s crush on Mike. She explained to her aunt how Mike had been traumatized with his parents’ death and Max had told her he did not know how to like someone, so it was better if Eleven just forgot about him. She told her aunt about the weeks she had ignored Mike, and the small fight – if it could be called a fight – that they had three days after her birthday. That was when they got together, she explained to her aunt. She told her every detail of her story with Mike, until she finally came to her fight with Max.

“I never told Max about it... I’m seeing Mike for so long now and I- I didn’t think once to tell Max again about it.”

Becky looked at her niece with sympathetic eyes, stroking her hand gently.

“Have you tried to talk to her after the fight?”

Eleven shook her head.

“Why not?”

"You don't know how stubborn Max is... The only way we could make up if she wants that. And I know she doesn't. She's really mad at me." Eleven pulled her hand from her aunt's and sat up straight. She grabbed her glass of lemonade, which was almost empty. "And I guess she has the right to be. I mean, I did lie to her for months."

"It wasn't really lying, was it, Jane?" Her aunt retorted.

Eleven shrugged and stood up, taking her glass with her.

It didn't matter, did it? Max was mad at her and would remain that way until she felt like it. Eleven just hoped that there was a still a chance for them to be friends again.

*"You have to come and visit us, Mike," Aunt Mandy said during dinner.*

*Mike looked at her, then at his uncle, and finally at his two cousins. Max refused to meet his eyes. He nodded.*

*"I will, Aunt Mandy. I'll just be one hour away from here."*

Mike had his door opened while he packed. The guest-room in which he had stayed for the past two years was finally becoming a guest-room again. There were no posters in the walls, no books in the shelves, no boy clothes spread around on the floor, or in the armchair. Mike's belongings were almost all inside boxes.

Max, who had spent the afternoon in the lake with Dustin, had just got home. She found her brother watching TV and drinking a beer. She rolled her eyes, wondering when he was going to do something good in his life for once, and walked up the stairs.

She found Mike in his bedroom, folding a warm sweatshirt. She stopped and stared at his back.

Mike had come back from Ohio ten days ago and started packing straightaway. If he was not packing, he was out with Lucas and Will, or, because Max knew better, with Eleven too.

Oblivious to her presence, Mike turned around to go get something from his desk. That was when he saw her.



“Hey,” he greeted.

Max licked her lips.

“Hey.”

They went quiet, both not looking at each other. They felt awkward in the presence of one another because they were both parts of a messed-up situation, but had yet talked about it.

At last, Max decided to react and say something.

“Well, I guess I’m going-“

“Can I talk to you?” Mike asked.

Max blinked, surprised.

“Hum...” She looked around, wondering what to do.

“Please, Max.”

She nodded.

Mike took one of his boxes from the bed while Max entered his bedroom. She stood by the door and crossed her arms over her stomach, feeling uncomfortable.

Mike sat down on the bed and looked at her.

“We have to talk.”

Max frowned.

“About what?”

“About you and Eleven.”

Max snorted cynically.

“Everyone knows about me and Eleven. What everyone doesn’t know is about *you* and her.”

Mike bit his tongue, controlling himself, and nodded, agreeing with her.

“Yeah, you’re right. So, is there anything you want to know?”

Max stared at him in silence.

Mike looked at her back, with a weight on his shoulders that he did not know he had been carrying until this moment. Max looked more hurt than angry. She looked like a lost kid. Because she had lost her best friend.

Max and Eleven’s friendship had fascinated Mike when he first moved to Hawkins. They were always together and, despite having such different personalities, they worked well together. They depended on each other to be better.

“Why?” Max finally asked. “Why did you guys.... Do that?”

Mike frowned.

“Do what? Fell for each other?”

Max’s eyes went wide-opened for a second.

“You’re in love?” She asked dumbfounded.

Mike looked away, his cheekbones turning a little red.

“I-I don’t know. I just... I... I feel something, and –“ Mike looked down at his hands, which were awkwardly playing with each other – “You’re her best friend, Max.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I’m not. This is what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Max puffed and rolled her eyes.

There it was, Max acting all tough, pretending it didn’t bother her at all that she had not spoken with her best friend in weeks. Actually, in months.

"I'm going away soon," Mike said.

"That means what? You're breaking up with her?"

Mike sighed.

"I want you two to make up."

Max snorted.

"Well, you're not the boss of the world, Mike. Just because you want something doesn't mean people are going to give it to you," she said harshly.

"I know that, Max," Mike replied angrily. "I know that very well."

Max stared at her cousin, losing a bit of her confident façade.

"But I saw how you two were with each other. You need her. And... She didn't tell you because of me, okay?"

"Why, you asked her not to?" Max tried to guess.

Mike shook his head.

"No, but you know how I got, after my parents' death," Mike said. "I... I'm very scared. Of everything. And Eleven..., she knows that. She knows that I'm not okay with people ogling at me, like... like waiting for me to be happy out of blue." Mike looked at his cousin. "That's why she didn't tell you anything. She was just... protecting me, I guess."

Max didn't say anything at first.

Then, she licked her lips, nodded vaguely and turned around to leave the bedroom.

"Max," Mike called out. His cousin looked back at him, her arms still crossed over her stomach. "Eleven makes me happy. But she makes me happy because she is happy... And... she is only happy if she has you... You're her best friend."

Max blinked slowly. She bit the inside of her mouth, thinking.

"She told me you guys were seeing each other," she stated. Mike nodded. "Only seeing? Never dating?"

Mike opened his mouth to reply, but then closed it, unsure of what to say.

"I-I don't know yet. I mean, you know it's complicated and I-"

"Mike," Max interrupted him. He looked at her. "Don't you dare to tell me that I've been mad at my best friend for over two months and you won't even ask her to be your girlfriend."

Then, she left his bedroom.

*"Are you worried he'll cheat?" Jennifer asked Eleven. They were unpacking their new school textbooks. Junior year. What a disgrace.*

*Eleven raised her eyes from the still smelling like new English textbook.*

*"I... Well, no."*

*"Really?"*

*"Well, it's not cheating if you're not dating. Right?"*

"When do you leave?" Eleven asked Mike, standing in the guest-room of the Winter's house.

Max was out for the afternoon with Dustin, Mike had told her, it was okay to come here.

"In... a week and half," Mike replied. "Twelve days," he added.

Eleven nodded.

The room was no longer Mike's bedroom, and that made Eleven sad. The walls had lost their posters, the desk was empty and the wardrobe only had Mike's summer clothes. His suitcase was resting by the door, waiting to be packed in his final days in Hawkins.

She sighed sadly and sat down on the edge of the bed. Mike took the

space next to her and dropped a hand on her knee.

“You’re going to start working too, right?”

Mike nodded.

“You’ll never come here.”

“I won’t have classes every day. And it’s just one hour... I can easily come here, spend some time with you and go back,” Mike said.

Eleven looked at him.

Downstairs, they suddenly heard Billy’s yelling a happy chant. He was watching football.

“You don’t have to go to that trouble,” Eleven suddenly remind him.

They weren’t dating. They were just... fooling around. Fooling around and acting like boyfriend and girlfriend basically all the time, but not dating.

Mike frowned.

“I... I want to.”

Eleven’s lips curled into a sad smile.

“Really?”

Mike nodded and slid his body closer to hers. Eleven’s hand embraced his upper arm and squeezed it. Mike leaned his head against hers and closed his eyes.

Finally, they shortened the distance between their mouths.

“Oh, hey guys.”

Eleven and Mike pulled back to find Dustin and Max standing outside the bedroom looking at them. Dustin was waving sheepish and Max was frowning.

“Oh, hey Dustin. Hey Max,” Mike greeted.

“Hey,” Eleven muttered.

“Weren’t you guys out this afternoon?” Mike asked.

To everyone’s surprise, Max left and went to her bedroom. Dusting stayed behind, looking worried over his shoulder and back at the couple.

“Well, yeah, but the place was closed. It’s their day off, so we decided to come back here...” Dustin cleared his throat. “Well, anyways, I’m going to- Yeah, going. Bye.”

“Bye,” Mike and Eleven said and watched Dustin get into Max’s bedroom and close the door.

Mike stood up and went to close his bedroom’s door. Well, the guest-room’s door. In twelve days, he would be gone.

“Sorry,” Mike said as he sat down next to her again.

Eleven sighed.

She missed Max dearly.

They used to be together every day. Talk all the time. Text. Call. Everything. People used to make jokes about how it was impossible for them not to be sick of each other after spending ten years glued to each other.

Eleven suddenly remembered how they had met, in first grade, when the teacher re-arranged the classroom position. She and Max ended up sitting next to each other. It had been a match made in heaven.

The guest-room’s door abruptly opened, scaring both Eleven and Mike.

“I want to talk to you,” Max stated.

Eleven blinked and pointed at herself.

“M-me?”

Max nodded, trying to keep up a cool façade.

Eleven looked over at Mike, who forced a smile, motivating her to go.

“Okay,” Eleven agreed and stood up.

When she entered Max’s bedroom, Dustin left, not before sending her an uncomfortable smile. Max closed the door behind him. Eleven sat down on the bed, where Dustin had been.

Max stared at her best friend with arms crossed in front of her stomach. Neither said anything for a while, Eleven waiting for Max to start talking and Max thinking where to start.

“You never lied to me, right?” Max finally asked.

Eleven stared at her wide-eyed.

“W-what?”

“Besides this time, about my cousin, you never... hid anything from me, right?”

Eleven shook her head.

“No, of course not. You know that. You know you are the first person I talk to about everything. You can ask my mom, even she knows.”

Max managed to half-smile at that.

“I know that,” she confessed, looking down at her feet. Then, she faced Eleven again. “From 1 to 10, how good of a kisser is my cousin?”

Eleven blinked.

“W-what?” She found herself saying again.

Max shrugged and uncrossed her arms.

“If it were any other guy, you’d tell me these things,” Max said as she approached the bed. She sat down next to Eleven. “So, from one to ten?”

Eleven looked at her a bit shocked at first. Then, she actually thought about an answer.

“A nine.”

“A nine?” Max repeated, amazed.

Eleven half-smiled shyly.

“There’s always room for improvement, right?”

Max laughed.

Eleven blinked, surprised to hear her best friend laughing, and smiled a bit more confidently.

“Okay...” Max nodded. “From one to ten, how is he in bed?”

Eleven blushed.

“It’s your cousin.”

“Come on, Ellie.”

Ellie. Max called her Ellie.

“We haven’t actually done it...”

Max frowned.

“No?”

Eleven blushed.

“No, but...” She fidgeted with her hands awkwardly, “... he has magical fingers.”

Max’s mouth opened in shock. “That dog!”

Eleven covered her blushing face with her hands as Max laughed hysterically.

“Stop laughing,” Eleven requested.



“Okay, okay,” Max pretended to clean tears from her eyes. Then, her face got serious. “From one to ten, how happy are you with him?”

Eleven didn’t hesitate in answering, “An eleven.”

Max smiled softly.

*An eleven* was a joke between the them. It meant that Eleven was feeling her happiest whenever she was feeling like *an eleven*. From one to ten, how much she like this or that? *An eleven* meant it was her favourite.

“I know I was wrong,” Eleven suddenly said. “But it- I was thinking about him, Max. About how he didn’t know how to like someone, like you told me... He was liking me. He is liking me... I just focused on him. I’m sorry.”

Max shook her head.

“My cousin is a pain in the ass,” she said. Eleven frowned, disagreeing. Max chuckled. “He is. He used to be more, though, so you’re a bit safe now. But... I was never mad that you were with him, Ellie. I was mad because you felt like you couldn’t trust me, and because I didn’t see it. I’m as your best friend as you are mine, and I didn’t see what was happening right under my nose.”

Max was shaking her head sadly, a bit angry as well, but at herself, and not at Eleven.

Eleven put a careful hand over Max’s.

“We both made a mistake?” She tried.

Max nodded.

“We both made a mistake.”

And then, they both hugged like they hadn’t seen each other in years. It felt right. It felt so right.

Max and Eleven, the inseparable friends, were going to inseparable again.

“Oh God, I have so much to tell you!” Max exclaimed in Eleven’s ear.

Eleven giggled.

“I have a dozen news things to tell you too.”

*“Maybe I’m not the best choice for your daughter, Mrs. Ives,” Mike started by saying. Terry Ives’ face changed from a polite smile into a worried expression. “But I... I want to be. I’m trying to be, you know, the best choice, and the person that can make her happy... And I think that... someday I’ll stand here and tell you that I am, I am that person. I can Eleven’s happy as easily as I can breathe. Because it will come to that. Right now...Right now, I’m not sure of that. But I’m sure that... I’m sure that I want your blessing, Mrs. Ives, so I can date Eleven and start making her happy.”*

*Mike stared at Terry Ives almost with a constipated look that made her want to chuckle. He was sweating as well. He was a wreck, facing her, asking her for her blessing.*

*Terry smiled softly. “Okay.”*

Mike was leaving in five days. Classes would start in eight days. He felt nervous, yet excited about it. It would be like a new start, living with his two sisters and Lucas, studying what he actually wanted to study and learn, working somewhere he had yet found to pay off his college’s fee. Then, he would have Eleven. Eleven would be his safe haven.

But first, he had to ask her to be it.

“I may have a visit tonight. For dinner,” Mike warned his aunt.

Mandy Winter frowned as she took out cleaned plates from the dishwasher.

“Who?”

Mike coughed, embarrassed.

“You’ll see. It will depend if the person says yes.”

“To come have dinner with us?”

*To be my girlfriend.*

“Yeah.”

Mandy Winter smiled at her nephew.

“Okay. Just text me if that person is indeed coming or not.”

Mike gave his aunt a thumbs-up before walking out of the kitchen. He grabbed Billy’s car keys from their usual spot in the living-room and left the house.

Eleven was waiting for him at her house’s porch. She was wearing a white skirt that went almost until her knees and a light pink blouse. As she approached the car, Mike noticed how the first buttons of her blouse were open, showing off a bit much of her smooth skin. When Eleven opened the door, and leaned down to get in, Mike was sure he saw a bit of her bra.

Eleven smiled at him after putting on her seatbelt.

“So, where are we going?”

Mike smiled back at her, a bit nervous.

“You’ll see.”

He took them to the lake. At this time of the year, early September, no teenager went there, having left behind their summer days and getting now mentally prepared for school.

Mike parked Billy’s car by a tree.

They walked up to the edge of the lake.

“Do you think it’s cold?” Mike asked.

Eleven frowned and took a good look at the clean water of the lake. She shrugged.

“We can try?” She tempted.

He smiled. It was like she read his mind.

They took off their clothes with no awkwardness or shame. It didn't matter to both if they were in their underwear or not. Like Eleven had once said, *it's like seeing me in a bikini*. And it's not like they had not been in their underwear before. There had been a few nights – some at Eleven's, others at Mike's – in which they took their make-out sessions a bit too far.

“Are you ready?” Mike asked, grabbing her hand. They had taken a few steps back and folded their clothes under a tree. Funnily enough, it was the same tree they had been the previous year, when they had come with Lucas, Will and Max to the lake for the first time. When they also had kissed for the first time.

Eleven made a face.

“Do we really have to jump?”

“It'll be more fun.”

“How about you jump and I go in slower?”

Mike put on his best puppy eyes. Eleven giggled.

“Go ahead, really.”

He sighed.

“Okay.”

He let go of her hand and ran to the water, jumping in and almost splashing Eleven.

She giggled again and walked over to the lake's border. She sat down slowly, putting one leg in the water and then the other one. Mike swam to where she was.

Eleven felt him grabbing her legs underwater and raised an eyebrow, curious. He smiled softly at her and made way between her legs. He placed his arms gently on her thighs and Eleven shivered.

“Jesus, you’re cold.”

“That’s just because you’re still out of the water,” Mike said cheekily and moved one finger closer to her stomach. He saw her skin quiver.

“Don’t do that,” she asked and grabbed his hand, pulling it away from her dry skin.

Mike gave her a wide smile. Eleven stared at him with kind eyes, a warm good feeling filling her in.

When Mike smiled at her like that, she always got to wonder how he was like before, as a kid, as a happy son with two parents who loved each other. She wondered how Mike was before he came to Hawkins. Had he been happier than he was here? Was he actually okay now with where his life was heading?

“Can you step away?” She suddenly asked.

Mike frowned.

“Why?”

But he swam a bit away from her, giving her the right space to get into the water.

“Jeez, it’s cold,” she muttered as the water got to her chest. She finally let go of the lake’s border and started moving her arms in the water, keeping herself on the surface.

Mike got closer to her again and wrapped his arms around her. Eleven smiled at him. He leaned in and kissed her softly.

He felt arms embrace his shoulders and a hand interweaving with his wet hair. Her warm, sweet-tasting tongue met his and Mike took a deep breath from his nose. Eleven pulled their bodies closer, their torsos touching from one edge to the other.

Eleven wasn’t shy when it was just the two of them. Sometimes, in public, when they went out to other cities, of course, and Mike would steal a quick kiss from her cheek or her lips, she would blush intensely and smile shyly at him like she had not expected those

actions from him. Maybe, in the beginning, Mike wouldn't be too inclined for those kinds of public affections. Hell, he wouldn't be inclined to any kind of public affection. But with Eleven, he didn't mind. He didn't mind at all.

Mike suddenly pulled back, leaving his lips hovering Eleven's for just a teasing second, and then he started swimming them to the middle of the lake.

Eleven's arms tightened around his neck.

"I don't like deep waters," she muttered.

Mike stopped still. They weren't quite in the middle, but already a bit far from the land.

"I didn't know that," Mike said.

She shrugged.

"I mean, I'm not scared or anything. I'm cool. I just... Sometimes, yeah, they kind be a bit scary, you know?"

Mike nodded. Then, he squeezed his arms, which were embracing Eleven by her waist.

"You're safe, though."

She smiled and kissed him.

*You have to ask her, dummy.*

Mike pulled back. He waited for Eleven to open her eyes.

They stared at each other for quite a bit, Eleven's fingers playing with Mike's wet hair, and his hands nervously digging into the skin of her back.

When Eleven was about to lean in to another kiss, Mike shook his head. She frowned.

"What's-"

“Will you be my girlfriend?”

Eleven blinked.

The grip she had had on Mike’s neck loosened up a bit.

Mike looked at her, feeling scared. His heart was beating fast.

What if she said no?

Why didn’t he consider that option?

What-

“Are you serious?” Eleven asked.

Mike nodded.

“Of course I am.”

Eleven’s lips curled into a happy smile. Mike found himself smiling back, a bit apprehensive.

“I can’t believe it,” Eleven confessed. “I- You really asked me to be your girlfriend?”

“And I really want an answer, El,” Mike gulped.

She giggled, her arms tightening again around his neck and her lips finding his.

Mike kissed her back, matching up the passion she was giving as best as he could. He was taking this as a yes. He wanted this to be a yes.

“Yes,” Eleven finally said in words. “Yes, I will be your girlfriend, Mike Wheeler.”

Mike breathed heavily, feeling relief. And then, there was happiness. Happiness as he had yet felt since his parents’ death. Happiness without a heavy heart or a sick stomach. A good feeling without remorse.

“R-really?”

She nodded frenetically, with a crazy happy smile on her face.

“Why would I say no?”

“I-I don’t know,” he replied. “Why would you say yes?”

“Because I like you, of course,” she answered. “And I like everything about you.”

Mike snorted.

“You can’t like everything about me.”

“Mike,” Eleven said seriously, one of her hands touching his cheek. “I like everything about you.”

Mike found himself smiling wildly.

This was it. This was happiness with no guilt on it.

*“We are going where?!”*

*Eleven was staring at him agape, holding her blouse in her hands. She already had her skirt dressed.*

*Mike finished putting on his t-shirt before repeating, “Dinner. With my aunt, uncle and cousins. Max included.”*

*Eleven kept staring at him.*

*“A-are you insane?”*

“I can’t do it.”

Mike had parked Billy’s car in front of Winter’s house. He had already seen Max by the window with a cheeky smirk on her face.

“Yes, you can,” Mike said. “I mean, they know you. You’re Max’s best friend.”

“Exactly. Max’s best friend,” Eleven said. “Not Mike’s for-a-few-hours girlfriend.”



Mike leaned over and grabbed her shaking hands. She looked at him, worried.

“Nothing, but nothing can go wrong, El.”

“Billy can go wrong.”

Mike gave her an *are you kidding me* kind of look.

“But that’s Billy,” Mike replied. “He always goes wrong.”

Eleven sighed.

Mr. and Mrs. Winter had known her since she was six years old. They loved her dearly, always asking her about her day and making sure everything was alright with her. They even got her a gift every Christmas. But they did that because she was their daughter’s best friend.

How would react now that Eleven had a second title in their family?

“Okay,” she found herself saying and nodding. “Okay, let’s go.”

They got out of the car and Mike made sure to quickly step into Eleven’s side and grab her hand. On her bedroom’s window, Max smirked at the couple.

Mike opened the front door and walked in. Eleven let go of his hand as she heard his aunt walking out of the kitchen.

“Oh, hello, Eleven, dear,” Mandy Winter greeted her daughter’s best friend.

Eleven forced a polite smile.

“Hello, Mrs. Winter.”

Mrs. Winter smiled at her and then turned to her nephew.

“So, are you bringing someone to dinner or not? You never texted me about it.”

Mike chuckled nervously. Eleven felt her breathing out of a control.

“Actually, Aunt Mandy-“

He stopped talking as he heard steps walking down the stairs.

Max showed up, stopping at the end of the stairs with a cocky smile on her face. Mike rolled his eyes and turned to his aunt.

“I’ve already brought her to dinner,” Mike finished and made way to Eleven. He put an arm around her shoulders. Eleven blushed. “Eleven is my guest.”

Mandy Winter didn’t say anything at first, just stared at both with a frowning, confusing look all over her face. She was trying to understand the dynamic in this situation, in which her nephew was bringing her daughter’s best friend for dinner, and her daughter was not saying anything at all, just controlling her laugh, while her best friend blushed deeply.

“What’s going on here?” Her husband suddenly walked in the hall from the living-room and looked at them with curious eyes and a newspaper under his arm. He stopped by Mike and Eleven’s and noticed how his nephew had an arm around his daughter’s best friend. “Why are you two so close?”

Max laughed loudly and even clapped her hands as if she had just heard the best joke ever.

This time, Mike’s face became as red as Eleven’s.

“We’re... We’re dating.”

John Winter looked over at his only daughter who was now trying to hide her chuckles behind her hands. Then, he looked at his wife who had her eyes wide-opened as she stared at the two teenagers. Neither of them were being helpful. So, John cleared his throat.

“Well, that’s good. Right?”

Mike’s smile was hesitant and careful.

“We hope so?”

Eleven nodded shyly on his side.

“Yeah, it’s great,” Max commented with a laidback smile, actually helping out Mike and Eleven.

Upon hearing her daughter’s words, Mandy Winter blinked, closed her mouth and relaxed her shoulders. She smiled tentatively.

“Well, if Max says it’s great, and you two look like... you’re good, that’s good for us too, right John?”

“That’s what I said,” John said. Then he took the newspaper from under his arm and waved it a bit. “Now, excuse me, I’ve businesses upstairs.”

Max rolled her eyes as her father passed by her in the stairs.

Mandy Winter, with nothing else to add to the conversation, forced a smile again and went back to the kitchen.

Max stared at her best friend and cousin. Mike dropped his arm around Eleven and she looked up at him in a concerned gaze. He touched her cheek, pulling small strand of her hair away from her face.

“You guys are disgusting,” Max joked.

They looked at her. Eleven blushed again. Max chuckled.

“I’m happy for you two, though.”

Eleven’s eyes opened wide in surprise. Then, the girl smiled.

“Really?”

Max nodded.

“Really.” She looked at her cousin. Mike was also smiling. Max pointed her finger at him. “But, if you hurt her, you know I’ll kill you during your sleep, right?”

Mike nodded, accepting the deal.

“Good,” Max ended the conversation.

“MAX, CAN YOU GO WAKE UP YOUR BROTHER?” Her mother shouted from the kitchen.

Max made a bored sound and climbed the stairs fast.

Mike turned to Eleven and, now that they were alone, he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer to him.

“I told you it would be okay.”

Eleven lifted her hands and rested them on Mike’s upper arms. She slipped them under his t-shirt and felt the softness of his skin.

“For now,” she retorted.

“And forever,” he added.

Eleven smiled tenderly.

“Is that a promise?” She asked.

Mike smiled back.

“Yes.”

*“How’s your college girlfriend doing?”*

*“Max, stop,” Mike asked, not raising his eyes from his plate of food.*

*“What? I can’t ask you about her?”*

*Eleven rolled her eyes.*

*“If that’s the way you’re trying to find out if he’s cheating on me, it’s terrible.”*

*“Still. Being a good friend here.”*

*“No, you’re not,” Mike and Eleven said at the same time.*

Eleven was peeing. She was peeing a lot.

She looked down at the underwear she had grabbed: a pair of black boxers. And the t-shirt she had had on was too big for her and had Han Solo's face on it.

She literally had grabbed all clothes that belonged to Mike and left hers on the floor, where they had been for the past few hours.

Eleven flushed the toilet and turned to look herself in the mirror.

She had a hickey right above her collarbone and her cheekbones were still red as if she had just run a marathon.

It could have been a marathon.

Eleven washed her hands, dried them on a towel and then wrapped her loose curls into a floppy ponytail. She went back to Mike's bedroom, passing quietly through the corridor even though no one was home.

Nancy, Mike's older sister, was staying over at her two boyfriends' flat. Mike had once explained to her his sister's current love life and she had found it quite amusing.

Lucas was at a friend's house after Mike had hinted that the boy would rather stay out tonight instead of sharing a thin wall with the couple.

Holly had a sleepover.

Eleven closed the bedroom's door behind her and looked over at Mike. He was still in the same position she had left him: laying on his back, the dark blue sheets covering him until his waist, and with a hand behind his messy dark hair. Mike had had his eyes closed. But then he heard the door closing and opened them.

He smiled at Eleven.

"I took your clothes."

"I'm noticing," he remarked.

Eleven crawled her way up on the bed to her spot by Mike's body. He

dropped an arm around her as she laid her head on his chest. She heard his heart beat for a while, the calming rhythm relaxing her.

Mike had already finished a semester at University of Indiana, having passed all classes with straight A's. He had found a job back in October at a small bakery that paid him way above the average for a part-time job. He helped his older sister clean the house on Saturdays' mornings. He helped his younger sister do her homework. He talked every day on the phone with Eleven, and weekly with his aunt Mandy. The last six months in Indiana had been great. The only problem was, of course, the geographical distance between him and Eleven. They didn't get to spend a lot of time together, their relationship being nowadays more skyping, calling and texting than anything else. They tried to see each other as often as they could. But they were lucky if they managed to meet once a week.

"So..." Mike started.

"So..." Eleven repeated.

When Mike didn't add anything else, she raised her head to look at him.

"Did you like it?"

Eleven chuckled.

"You mean, dinner? You know I love pizza."

Mike rolled his eyes.

"I meant, ... you know."

It had been Eleven's first time. For months, she had thought about this moment until she finally decided that this was it, she wanted to have sex with her boyfriend. Instead of surprising Mike, she had called in a week ago and told him straight up that she was going to visit him and, yes, she wanted a night alone with him. Mike had understood her words, asked her if she was sure and Eleven had answered: *Of course I am. If I weren't, I wouldn't be telling you this, would I now?*

“Well...” Eleven started.

Had it been the perfect first time? No, of course. That only happened in films and TV shows. But...

“It was good,” she answered him. “I mean, it was weird too.”

“Sorry,” Mike muttered, looking away.

She shook her head, worried that she had made him feel bad, and touched his cheek, making him look back at her.

“No, don’t be. It was good. I mean, most people say it hurts.”

Mike made a face.

“That’s a myth. You know, because I’ve read that it only hurts when girls aren’t, well, ready. As in... there wasn’t much of a prepa- I mean, foreplay, and- Well-“

Eleven giggled, interrupting Mike’s rambling speech.

“You’re so silly,” she commented.

“You’re an amazing post-sex person,” Mike said sarcastically, rubbing his forehead. “You really know how to make a person feel good about themselves.”

Giggling, Eleven moved her body up, so she was more face to face with Mike. Then, she leaned down and kissed him.

When they pulled away, Eleven said, “Do you think we can get an empty house again before I leave?”

Mike stared at her as if she were crazy.

“You leave in three days.”

“So?”

“So, yeah, I’m going to pay them all to leave.”

Eleven smiled.

"I like you, Mike Wheeler."

He frowned a bit and moved his body, dragging Eleven with him. He turned to lie on his side, with her trapped under his arm.

"You just like me, eh?"

Eleven shrugged, with a teasing smile on her face.

"Maybe I like you a lot."

Mike kissed her nose and she giggled.

"I like you to the moon and back?" She tried again.

Mike kissed the corner of her lip and looked at her again.

"I may or not love you," Eleven replied.

Mike kissed her on the lips this time. His lips moved gently and slowly against hers, as if any brusque movement could break her. Eleven sighed happily.

Mike pulled back and looked at her.

"And now?"

Eleven stretched her hand and touched his face. She pulled him back to another kiss, but, right before their lips even touched, she whispered, "I love you."

Mike smiled.

"I love you too."

*"This is my mom. This is my dad. Mom, Dad, this is Eleven," Mike introduced his girlfriend to the gravestone in front of them.*

*Eleven smiled softly at the two round pictures of Mike's parents that were imbedded in the gravestone. Around them, the wind slowed down into a small breeze.*

*"They would have liked to meet you, you know?" Mike said in a sad*



voice.

*Eleven wrapped her arms around his waist. He put his arm around her, keeping her close.*

*"I would have liked to meet them too."*

"Are you happy?" Nancy asked her brother. She was leaning against the door, having just got in.

Mike, who had been checking himself in the mirror, making sure everything was okay with his clothing, looked over his shoulder.

"Nancy, it's my wedding day. What do you think?"

"I think Eleven looks amazing in her dress."

Mike groaned.

"Come on, that's mean."

Nancy smiled and approached him. She touched his tie, making sure the knot was well-done.

"Just like Dad taught you," she noticed.

Mike nodded.

"Of course. It's the best way to tie a tie, isn't it?"

Nancy looked at her brother with a soft expression.

"Are you happy?" She asked again.

"Yes," Mike answered nodding.

"And no guilt?"

Seven years had passed since their parents had died. Nancy still made sure her brother was living his life with no guilt haunting his heart.

"No guilt at all," Mike confirmed. "Eleven makes sure of that."

“She’s too good for you,” Nancy joked.

Mike chuckled.

“She knows that. But she also believes I’m too good for her, so...”  
Mike smiled, thinking about his soon-to-be wife. “I guess we’ll be okay.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thank you so much for reading this story. I hope you enjoyed this last chapter.

I decided to add the last scene as a sort of epilogue, so you could see that Mike and Eleven would have a happy life. Maybe, in the future, I’ll write a fourth chapter just about their domestic life.

If there are any grammar mistakes, I apologize.

Please, tell me your thoughts on it.

### **Author's Note:**

I do not know why I wrote this story, but I spent the last two days working on it. I hope you guys enjoyed it. There might be a second chapter of it.

I apologize for any grammar mistakes.

Please, tell me what you think.